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MURDOCK THE DREAD DETECTIVE



OR,

North-land Nick's Guardianship.

A Story of the Jacob's Ladder
Tragedy.

BY WM. H. MANNING,
AUTHOR OF "CENTRAL PACIFIC PAUL," "BOR-
DER BULLET," "SADDLE CHIEF KIT,"
"OLD DOUBLEDARK," "HOT
HEART," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE FATAL BEACON-LIGHT.

It seemed to be a great and glorious discovery when the owners of the decaying Bald Eagle Mine found the new vein of gold quartz, but a discovery more prolific of crime and trouble had never been made.

The event affected the partners in a widely different way as they sat in the evening shadows and talked it over. One was excited and exultant; the other was almost silent and, unknown to his companion, full of regret, anger and half-formed plots.

POINTING DOWNWARD NICK EXCLAIMED, "MEN'S TRACKS! BET YER A GUN THE CRITTERS AIN'T A HUNDRED ROD AWAY!"

"That vein will make us rich men!" declared Lemuel Holly, for the twentieth time.

"Yes," assented Francis Holbrook, feebly.

"I have been a miner too many years to be deceived by such indications as that. True, when I came to Jacob's Ladder and we bought the Bald Eagle, it did not pan out as I thought it would, but I judged by signs not the most reliable. Now, just as we are about to abandon the whole thing, up crops this vein, promising us the treasury of a Rothschild. It will make us rich, Francis—rich beyond expression!"

"Yes," replied Francis, moodily.

"What a change! One day to be as poor as Job's turkey; the next to be rich. Why don't you exult, man? I am twelve years your senior, but I feel like throwing up my hat and shouting like a schoolboy. We have been at starvation's board; we are now rich! A few days and all will be well. With such prospects ahead of us, it will not be hard to get moneyed men to advance us enough to get our new find in operation; then the golden shower will begin. Ha! this is life! life worth living!"

Lemuel Holly swung his hat around his head in excess of high spirits. He was forty years old, and a man always noted for silent, practical ways, but even the octogenarian is not proof against the gold fever.

Francis Holbrook made no demonstration. He and Holly were equal owners of the Bald Eagle, and, as the newly-found vein was in the old mine, it would bring him as much money as his partner, but he was cursing the hour that Holly's sharp eyes detected the vein.

If the darkness had not veiled his face, it would have been seen dark, dissatisfied and gloomy.

"We will visit the cabins, and then go to the town," pursued the senior partner, after a pause. "We must tell Milly of this!"

Milly! The name gave Holbrook a fresh start, and he bent a glance of hatred upon Holly. Milly was a wife—the wife of Lemuel Holly—but two men loved her, and the deeper passion of the two was that of Francis Holbrook.

The senior partner rose, and Francis followed his example. There were two shanties on the claim, one at the south, and one at the north. That day when they came up the range to wander about, rather than to work, in the mine, they had brought a few articles which must be gathered before they returned.

Separating, one went to the north shanty and one to the south.

When Holbrook was alone, under cover, he lighted a lamp and took from his pocket a small picture. It was that of a young woman who possessed an average amount of good looks.

It was Lemuel Holly's wife. Holbrook had the picture, but he was the only one who was aware of the fact. He had coveted it, and, believing she would not present it to him even if he asked for it, he had avoided useless words and stolen the article.

He gazed at the pictured face greedily for some time, and then pressed it to his lips passionately.

"Are you lost to me?" he whispered, in strange accents. "Has this accursed gold put you forever beyond my reach? Better that we had all starved together than that Holly should have had such luck to-day. Once you are rich, Milly, you will be independent of me, and, woman-like, when independent you will be scornful. You will forget the favors I have done you, and forget me!"

He raised his hand to fling the picture down and trample it under his heel, but checked the impulse.

"No, no, Milly; I will not use your likeness so; you are not to blame because Holly found the gold—you are not to blame for being a woman. Your heart is warm enough, and you would love me if Holly were out of the way."

He paused, meditated, and slowly added:

"If Holly were out of the way!"

There was dark significance in the words. He stood still, looking straight ahead with eyes that saw nothing. His gaze was all inward, as it were, and mental pictures were crowding each other there.

If Holly were out of the way!

After some delay Holbrook went about his work, which was soon finished. Then he left the shanty to rejoin the senior partner. Holly saluted him in his usual hearty way.

"You've been long, partner, but a man is not to blame for going into a day-dream when he's made such a discovery. No doubt I shall do the same later, but now I am all in a fever to go down and tell Milly. Dear girl! this matter means more to her than to me!"

Francis Holbrook darted a look of fury at the speaker. He dared not reply. The darkness concealed the glance; it would not hide anger, jealousy and fierce hatred, when these passions were rioting in his voice.

"You don't know what it is to have a wife," Holly went on, blindly. "A bachelor is careless and selfish; a married man lives for some one else—at least he does if he has a wife like Milly. I dare say you can't understand this, Frank."

Understand it! The junior partner felt like

venting his pent-up emotions in vehement words; he felt like saying: "Fool! dolt! clod! what do you know of the way a woman should be loved? Milly may be your wife, but my love for her is a rushing Niagara in comparison with your feeble regard!"

But, Francis said nothing of the kind. He suddenly found use of his tongue, and very quietly answered:

"I hope Milly will get happiness, as well as gold, out of your discovery."

"Ay, she will, and not only that, but bread to eat! We are at low tide now; I really wonder how Milly has met expenses, and kept food in the house."

Holbrook's face changed again. The puzzle was no puzzle to him. Lemuel Holly's wife was not a perfect woman, and she had taken money as a loan from Holbrook of which her husband knew nothing.

To loan that money Holbrook had gone hungry himself, many a time, finding reward in the thought that Milly was contracting a debt to him which she could never repay in money.

It had been Holbrook's idea that the loan should be kept from Holly, but when Milly knew it was the only condition upon which she could get the money, she did not scruple to take it, and hide the fact from her husband. She loved dress, ease, finery and display, and, in a small way, she was able to have them in the mountain town—by means of Holbrook's money.

The latter, however, knew that she would insist upon repaying him as soon as the newly-found vein in the Bald Eagle yielded its golden harvest. He did not want to be repaid. He had not gone hungry to do a benevolent act, and have it wiped out with gold; he had loaned money to Milly Holly because he coveted her love, and was resolved to have her in his power.

What were the riches of the new vein when it was to be harvested at such a cost?

If Holly were out of the way!

Again the thought came to Holbrook, and near Holly's heart beat another heart that was full of the deepest hatred for him.

The partners moved down the mountain-side. A few steps brought them to where the lights of the mining-town could be seen, and the senior partner was able to distinguish that particular light which marked the location of his own home.

The town of Jacob's Ladder lay in Wyoming, but so close to Colorado as to be almost a part of the latter. It was situated in a valley on the mountain-side, with an ascent to the west and a descent to the east, so that the fanciful name given it seemed appropriate.

Business at Jacob's Ladder was good. Its great specialty was gold-mining, and many of the mines paid well. About the only exception had been the Bald Eagle. The increase of population had been satisfactory. It was an alert, hustling place, with some good buildings and a few modern improvements.

That it would ever become a large city no one dared to hope. Rocks, ridges, canyons and cliffs were everywhere, and no effort of art could make it a place easy of access, or make level what Nature had turned almost upside down. The searcher for the wild side of Nature could find his fill around Jacob's Ladder.

The owners of the Bald Eagle toiled down this rough mountain-side toward the town. Silence had fallen between them, but Holly could not remain quiet.

"This will be a great change for us, Frank."

"Yes."

"Think how Milly will take it!"

"Why do you always talk of her? sharply demanded Holbrook.

"Because I always think of her."

"And you a business man!"

"You don't understand. You care for no woman, and can't feel for those who do. My life is bound up in Milly. Yes, and I'll make her the happiest woman alive. All our future life shall be a dream of paradise."

"How do you know that?"

"Because Milly will make it so."

"Will she?"

"Yes. As soon as we get to going I shall hire a man here in my place, and move to Denver. It will please Milly, you know."

"Take her away!" cried Holbrook, startled.

"Yes. You shall manage here. In a month or so Milly and I leave, never to return."

"Stop!"

Holbrook spoke in a low, husky voice, but Holly obeyed without suspicion. They stood where the trail led along the edge of a precipice. From the black gulf below arose a sullen roar. Holbrook knew it was the voice of Babel Run, a stream that went dashing over rocks and ledges many feet below.

"Can you see your home from here?" he asked, in a voice singularly deliberate.

"I can see its light," Holly responded.

"Milly is there?"

"Yes; and, as usual, she has set a light in the window for me."

"A thought strikes me, Lemuel. If, by any strange chance—heart-disease, we will say—you were to die suddenly, now and here, would it not suit your fancy to look your last look of earth upon that beacon-light?"

"It certainly would, Frank."

"You are sure you can distinguish it from the other lights?"

"Of course."

"Let us see if we agree upon it. Look steadily at the light, Lemuel, and point it out to me."

Holly obeyed. He directed the gaze; he directed the pointing finger. Holbrook saw the attitude taken, and then his own hands rose. He moved forward sharply; he flung his weight against the unsuspecting victim, and then the senior partner was dashed headlong over the edge of the precipice.

Milly's beacon-light vanished from his gaze.

CHAPTER II.

THE TESTIMONY OF BABEL RUN.

A CRY rose from the black gulf of night, and then all was quiet as before. Francis Holbrook knelt by the edge of the precipice. He knew there was a small chance that he might hear the body of his victim strike below, but, in the roar of the water, and the possibility that Holly might fall upon dry rocks, he did not expect it.

He heard nothing, but, long after he knew the descent must be finished, he knelt there and peered down. He could not see one-fourth of the distance, but the occupation had a fascination for him.

Holly was dead; that much he regarded as certain; but he was curious to know how he had died. Had it been on the rocks, or was Babel Run bearing the senseless body away?

After a long pause the assassin rose. The movement seemed to change the course of his thoughts, and he looked around in terror. What if his crime had been seen by prying eyes?

The possibility was so startling that he started and ran swiftly for several yards, but second thought caused him to return and search for interlopers. He found no one, and wandered back to where he and Holly had stood together for the last time. He was in a perspiration started by terror. He was no old hand at crime, and, despite the way he had meditated on how affairs would stand if Holly was out of the way, had not really intended to do the deed until, under the spur of the moment, he had yielded to the impulse of rage and jealousy, aroused by Holly's persistent reference to Milly, and enrolled himself in the list of murderers.

He turned toward the village.

From the window of Holly's house Milly's beacon-light was still shining!

Holbrook covered his face with his hands.

"He brought it on himself!" the survivor muttered.

It was an excuse criminally weak, and he knew it. For a moment horror, not of detection but of remorse, seized upon him. The emotion soon passed—he remembered how the deed had changed the situation.

Milly was free!

Exultation came to Holbrook. Milly was free—free as any maiden in the land—free to bestow her love upon whom she chose.

"Yes," he thought; "and she is my debtor for money loaned, and will now starve if she don't let me help her further!"

He did not forget that there were people in the town who were unselfishly charitable, but he knew the widow regarded him as her best friend next to Holly, and was pliable enough to be influenced by him in the future as she had been in the past.

The full measure of his triumph made him long to sing and dance. Holly was out of the way; the knowledge of the new vein of gold in the Bald Eagle was his, alone; Milly should be his, alone.

Although the crime had been one of impulse, all things were in his favor. It would be thought that the senior partner had fallen over the precipice accidentally—if the body was found. He hoped it would be found, and would have gone down to the bed of Babel Run had not the steep cliff made a long and risky journey an accompanying necessity of such a step.

"Better let him lie there; I'll go home."

He went at once, and his movements had not been so light and buoyant in many months. The same was true of his mind. Now and then he had an uneasy feeling that he might have been watched, but such a thing was not likely. For the man he had flung over the cliff he had no pity, and no thought except as the case bore upon Milly and the future.

He reached home and retired.

It was long before he slept.

He was not nervous, but exultation filled his mind, and too many thoughts crowded upon each other to make the night peaceful, or sleep a ready guest.

He had expected to be called up before day-break to answer questions in regard to Lemuel Holly, but this did not happen. He was lying in bed the next morning, thinking the situation over, and mechanically watching the first gleams of the sun, when his landlady knocked at the door.

When he answered she announced:

"Mrs. Holly is here to see you, sir!"

"Tell her I'll be out in a moment."

Francis rose and dressed. He did not use any undue haste, or exhibit nervousness. He had

prepared for the critical periods to come and his calmness was not the result of enforced self-control; it was, rather, the composure of a man who felt confident of safety in the present and victory in the future.

When he went out and saw Milly the severest trial came.

Despite all he could do some part of his fierce passion was visible in his face and eyes. He was looking at the woman he loved, and she was free—free! He longed to clasp her in his arms and shower impetuous kisses upon her lips.

To resist the temptation he put his hands behind his back and firmly clasped one wrist with the other hand.

This Milly who had been the cause of a murder was not a remarkable woman in face, form or intellect. She was considered very amiable, but lacking in decision; every one admitted that, and many had said that she was of weak and pliable mind—weak, not from the lack of ordinary intelligence, but of ordinary firmness.

She was slender, and about the average height of her sex. Her form was the reverse of voluptuous; she was lacking in strength, flesh and perfect development, and would never have been sought as an artist's model.

Her face was fairly pretty in a delicate way, but it was narrow, and one could imagine that when what might be called the superficial flesh of youth should give way to the hardened outlines of middle age, she would have but little to attract, and less ground to claim good looks.

At present she was but little past her twentieth year, and the charm of youth made her attractive in a measure. And it has been seen how she had fired one man's heart.

Holbrook forced himself to appear calm, and bade her good-morning.

"Where is Lemuel?" she asked, anxiously.

"Lemuel? I don't know; he has not been here."

"Where did he go last night?"

"I did not see him after he went home."

"He did not come home?"

"Not come home?" Francis echoed.

"No."

"That's odd."

"I am worried about him."

"Do you mean that he was not home to supper?"

"Yes; and not since he went away in the morning. I am dreadfully worried. When did you see him last?"

"At the mine. He left half an hour ahead of me, and started down the trail as usual. I supposed, of course, that he was at home."

"Something has happened to him!"

It was a pale, anxious face that was upturned to Holbrook's. Milly was attached to Lemuel, and did not love Francis. She knew he admired her, and, since she had accepted the secret loans of money, she had thought more of Francis than was prudent, but her love remained where it belonged.

Holbrook assumed a thoughtful expression.

"Did any one see him in town?" he asked.

"I don't know; it is early, and I have asked only you."

"I'll investigate."

Accompanied by Milly, he went to the west end of the street. At that point lived a merchant who, as every one knew, had friendly acquaintance with Hally. Indeed, as he stated in the conversation which followed, the previous evening was the first in three months, or more, that bluff, hearty Lemuel Holly had not stopped to say a friendly word to the merchant who, from lack of driving trade, was always to be found sitting outside the door at the sunset hour.

The night before, this man had not seen Holly.

When this report was made, it became clear that there was ground for real fear, and Milly was more agitated than ever.

Francis assumed the role of comforter.

He could not, however, remove her fears, and when others were consulted, and the situation made known fully, one opinion became general among the people.

Was it not probable that the senior partner of the Bald Eagle had met with some serious accident, in the darkness, on the dangerous trail?

Lack of sympathy was, as a rule, a thing unknown in Jacob's Ladder, and, in a short time, a party of searchers was assembled. It was divided into two detachments, the first of which was to take the trail which led up to the Bald Eagle; the second, the more difficult path through Babel Run Canyon.

With the latter party went Francis and Milly, for in the canyon, so thought nearly every one, the body would be found if harm had come to Lemuel—certainly, it would be found there, if found at all, if Lemuel had fallen over a cliff.

Francis was very kind and thoughtful on this melancholy occasion.

He constantly kept by Milly's side, and helped her whenever the way was rough and difficult. Even in her distress she was grateful. How kind, sympathetic, and disinterestedly thoughtful Francis was.

They approached the scene of the tragedy. Then came the test of the assassin's nerve, but he was not found wanting; no agitation be-

trayed him to his companions. Even when, glancing ahead, he saw a form clad in man's apparel lying half in the stream, he did not waver.

The second man to make the discovery called a halt.

Ordering all others to remain where they were, he went forward with one companion.

He soon returned to make his report.

"It is Holly," he announced, in a hushed voice. "Of course he is not alive. The terrible fall bruised him so that his own mother would not know him, but the clothes, the watch, and the hair are his, and on the ground are the tools he was bringing away from the mine. Ma'am, you had better not go near!"

This was said to Milly, but she was not to be stopped. She was very pale and weak, but she turned to Francis.

"Give me your arm!" she directed, faintly.

A pause, and then she added:

"You are the only friend I have left!"

It was the expression of a stricken heart. Luckily, she had lowered her voice so that the last words were unheard by the other men—truer friends to her by far than the murderer of Lemuel Holly—and no one thought of feeling a sense of injustice.

Holbrook's heart leaped with joy. His plot was working well; already Milly was turning to him as her natural and sole protector. It was hard to remain sad-faced then, but, unlike the first of all murderers, there was no Omnipotent voice to tell what Omnipotent eyes had seen.

The murderer led the widow forward.

There lay the work of his criminal hands. Milly broke into passionate weeping and dropped on her knees by the body. But Francis mechanically looked toward the top of the cliff, and in imagination he again saw the senior partner stand there and look at Milly's beacon-light.

The eyes of the silent form at Francis's feet had seen the last beacon-light of earth.

CHAPTER III.

THE WIDOW CONSENTS TO BE CONSOLED.

At the east of the town a new grave had been made, and above it was a rude, temporary headstone upon which, lacking the services of a stone-cutter, had been painted these words:

"LEMUEL HOLLY,

"DIED, MAY 28TH, 1887,

"AGED 40 YEARS.

"Honor, Nobility and Practical Christianity was his birthright; Heaven and our love was his inheritance. He is still watching over us!"

All of this epitaph was composed by Francis Holbrook except the last sentence, and he considered that he had done especially well when he presented the tribute to the notice of the widow, but when she added the last six words, unknown to the junior partner, Francis was not so well pleased.

"He is still watching over us!"

In Francis's mind the fifth word became a nonentity, and, to him, the assertion stood in bold words—"He is still watching us!"

This was just what the junior partner did not want. For reasons known to himself, if not to Milly, he did not want Lemuel to watch them, even if he was dead.

However, there the sentence stood in distinct letters, and Francis had to hold his peace.

After the interment he accompanied Milly home, remained a short time to console her, and then, saying in low tones that he would call the next day and speak on business matters, left her with the really-sympathetic members of her own sex and went to his boarding-house.

Once there he gave himself up to a good cigar and to meditation.

What a change a week had made in his prospects!

Before, he had been almost penniless and the victim of a love that seemed hopeless; now, he was rich, and, he thought, sure to marry the woman he loved.

Carefully he had studied every look and vocal inflection of those about him, and he was positive that no one had the least suspicion of him.

By one bold stroke he had rid himself of a rival, won a wife, and became possessor of the Bald Eagle. Glorious victory! Never before had he realized how easy it was to secure all things desirable in a simple way.

As he smoked he arranged plans for the future, and it need scarcely be said that prompt statement of the newly-found vein in the Bald Eagle was not one of them. To reveal that discovery would be to make Milly independent of him, and this he was too shrewd to do.

No; no-one but himself must know of the gold there until Milly was his beyond question; he would go half-starved for months rather than to put his scheme in jeopardy.

"However," he thought, "this must not be a long wooing. A starving widow should be humble, and Milly must fall into my arms before the leaves turn brown in the fall. I've fairly won the treasure; it must be mine quickly."

The next day he was not forgetful of his promise, but went to see Milly. There were traces of tears on her face, but she brightened at sight of him. He took her hand and looked into her eyes with tender solicitude.

"I trust you are well to-day, dear madam?" he began, gently.

"As well as could be expected," sighed the widow.

"I know how you feel."

"It was so sudden."

"He is better off."

"But what of me?"

"You have lost the noblest of men."

"He is still watching over us!" sighed Milly.

Francis stirred uneasily. He did not like to have that gravestone sentiment flung at him so freely. Lemuel had gone out of life looking at Milly's beacon-light; he ought now to let terrestrial things alone.

"You will pardon me," interrupted Francis, "but even sorrow must yield a few moments to business when poverty keeps the keys. The Bald Eagle has not been paying well. How is your financial situation?"

Milly hesitated.

"Speak freely," he urged.

"I am almost penniless."

"Don't let that trouble you; I'll help you out."

"But I am already in debt to you."

Milly flushed a little as she spoke. Now, if not before, she was ashamed that, as a married woman, she had taken secret loans from Holbrook.

"What of that?" he returned, quickly. "Are we not partners in the mine?"

"Yes, but—"

"My dear lady, do not pain me by talking in this vein. I have always said that the Bald Eagle would become a paying institution sooner or later; I say so now. Lemuel and I stuck to it, bound to make or break. Why should not you and I do the same? I feel sure that I can, even while it is on weak footing, get enough out of it from day to day to feed the partners, you and I."

"But I cannot work in the mine."

"I can."

"It is not right that I should eat the bread of idleness."

"Surely, a mine-owner ought not to work!"

He spoke jestingly; she answered practically:

"Beggars should."

"Milly, you pain me. I feel that Lemuel has left a sacred responsibility to me. He and I were equal owners in the mine; I should be the basest of wretches to see you suffer."

"Indeed, I know—"

"Lemuel and I were like brothers, but I don't count that. Even if I had loved him less, common honor and my regard for you would demand that I take care of you as if you were my—my sister."

Francis had begun to be afraid that he was going to encounter strong resistance at the first stage of his battle, but he was in error. Milly was deeply relieved at that moment, and only too glad to accept his offer. She did not believe the Bald Eagle would ever pay—all of the people of Jacob's Ladder save the partners had arrived at that conclusion long before—but she was glad that Francis was not going to give up.

She hoped he would keep up the struggle for gold as long as he could get enough to support her, for she did not wish to work.

She was making some remonstrance, but did not intend to make it too strong to lose her financial supporter.

Milly was not a wicked or designing woman—though she was weak and selfish—and she would have been shocked had Francis spoken of matrimony at that moment. She did not think of matrimony, but she did covet life without physical labor.

Such being the case, Francis won his battle, and, after a little formality, it was agreed that he should go on with the mine, give Milly what money she needed, and get his pay from her, with interest, when the turn of the tide came and the Bald Eagle waxed successful.

When Francis left he had taken another step toward securing his so-called "treasure," Milly.

After that matters went smoothly. Francis "worked the mine"—worked it enough to allay suspicion, but took most of his golden gains from the new vein. The amount he gave Milly was large enough to clothe and feed her well, but small enough to keep her humble. Determined that she should not cease to be dependent by putting by money, he calculated to a fine point what she needed, and kept himself a necessity to her.

It was not a hard game to play. Milly ate the bread of idleness, and, though she suspected that he was having a hard struggle to make the mine support them, did not ask questions pointed enough to bring out that possible fact.

The general people had nothing to say. They were busy people—too busy to gossip more than Nature demanded, and, in a careless way, they thought the arrangement good.

Francis often felicitated himself on his good luck—it seemed almost remarkable. He would have been almost happy had it not been for two things:

First, at regular intervals, Milly insisted upon taking him to the senior partner's grave on a visit of affectionate tribute, and then he was stared in the face by that unpleasant line, "He is still watching over us!" That line troubled Francis.

Second, more than once, when coming down the trail, the survivor of the tragedy mechanically paused on the spot where Holly had stood before the fatal moment, and it grew to be a painful recollection that Holly had been slain looking at the light in the window.

"He is still watching over us!"

Watching—what? Watching Milly's beacon-light? Watching the efforts of the murderer to win the woman for whom he had sold his soul?

These trifles haunted Francis more than the actual crime, and he wished he could forget them.

Milly made an interesting widow. She wept, and was comforted. She looked sad, but consented to smile. She grieved, but did not pine away. Constant dropping of water wears the rock away. Milly's grief was not so firm as a rock; it wore away, but went much more rapidly than ever rock yielded to dropping water.

Lemuel died the 28th of May. By the 28th of June Milly was calm; by the 28th of July she was cheerful; by the 28th of August she was gay. On the first day of September Francis asked her a question:

"Will you be my wife?"

The question was not put so bluntly as that; the wooer was wily, and he used many words. He soothed, not wounded, her feelings, and approached the point so gradually that it gave her no severe shock.

Yet Milly remonstrated.

"I cannot, will not marry so soon after poor Lemuel's death!" she declared.

But she did. Francis used persuasion, and he used logical argument. Expenses must be cut down. Sooner or later the Bald Eagle would—it must—pay well; but, just then, it was paying so poorly that expenses must be cut down. It cost him as much to board as it would both if they were married and keeping house. Expenses must be cut down.

Milly still objected.

"We will wait the year out, dear," agreed Francis, gently, "if you can repay the sums I loaned you while Lemuel was alive, to be applied to developing the mine."

Ah! those loans, those horrible loans! There was not the shadow of a menace in Francis's voice, and Milly was not shrewd enough to see, just then, that he had an object in referring to them at that juncture, but mention of them made her wince.

Five minutes later she had consented to a speedy marriage.

October 1st they were married.

It was a quiet wedding. Lemuel had been in his grave a day less than four months, and the widow remembered the line she had herself caused to be placed on the headstone.

If Lemuel was "watching over" them, it would, no doubt, be as well to use no pomp or display in putting a successor in his place.

On the twenty-second day of October the declaration was made by Francis Holbrook that Milly "had brought him good luck." Why? Because, on that day, when he and Milly were wandering about in the Bald Eagle Mine, he had by accident discovered a new vein of gold—one so rich as to dazzle him!

Jacob's Ladder rung with the news.

The Bald Eagle had redeemed itself.

"Holbrook is clever," said the people, "but, above all, he owes his good luck to stubborn grit. He stuck to the mine when he had no hope. When he saw that gold to-day he must have been paralyzed with surprise!"

The voice of the people is not always the voice of wisdom.

CHAPTER IV.

QUESTIONS ASKED BY A STRANGER.

LEMUEL HOLLY had been dead a year, and the grass of another spring was green on his grave. A horseman, coming along the road from Razorback Bar, had nearly reached Jacob's Ladder when he came upon a second man who was contentedly sitting by the side of the trail.

The rider stopped his horse.

"Good-evening, friends."

"Evenin'!" was the terse, gruff reply.

"I think I am near Jacob's Ladder?"

"Thinkin' is a good exercise."

"Do I think right in this case?"

"Reckon! The town's over you."

"Do you live there?"

"Do I look like it?"

The man rose from the rock. He was a person who was nearing his sixtieth year, and his thick beard and hair were well sprinkled with gray. He was dressed in gray, too, but not as miners dress. The most noticeable article of his apparel was a hunting-shirt, or frock, with long skirts and a border of fringe.

He pulled vigorously at this garment, and said:

"Does that look like a city man's hide?"

"Perhaps you are a hunter?"

"I be."

The speaker leaned upon the long, old-fashioned rifle he carried, and steadily added:

"Tradition don't say much about me 'round hyar, but thar's a place whar it does. The towns o' men ain't my abidin'-place, an' I won't live in 'em no longer nor I'm obleeged to. Thar was a time when I hunted in these very mountains, but other men came an' I went north. I kep' on goin', keepin' ahead o' the towns o' men, until I crossed the line an' lived in the British region. I did it ter keep away from the towns, an' I expect finally ter live at the North Pole. At present I ain't bein' crowded up thar in the British hills, an' the place is my reg'lar home."

The horseman perceived that the man in the hunting-suit was an original character in his way, and was glad they had met.

"May I ask your name?" he returned.

"You sartainly may; I ain't asbamed of it. Men call me North-land Nick."

"Is it possible?"

"Why not?"

"I've often heard of a celebrated hunter so called—"

"I'm him."

"I'm very glad to meet you, Mr.—"

"Thar ain't no mister to it; I'm plain North-land Nick, a hunter from the Grizzly Ranges."

"You seem to have deserted them."

"Not fer Isaac! I came down this way on a brief trip, an' got a bullet put inter my cuticle by an accident. I've been hyer fer a matter o' six weeks, but it was only because the old man has been scoutin' so nigh the other world that he a'most got over the boundary-line. I should been a dead hunter, neighbor, only that I was nursed by as pooty a gal as ever made my heart go flipperty-thump under my weskit."

"You were in luck."

"You'd say so ef you's ter see my nurse. Leonis Vane is her name. She took sole keer o' me, only when Francis Holbrook's wife give her a rest. The two women is chums."

"Holbrook? Who is he?"

"Owns the Bald Eagle Mine."

"I think I have heard of the mine. Paying aff'air, isn't it?"

"Rich with gold as a miser."

"Is Holbrook sole owner?"

"Yes."

"Didn't he use to have a partner?"

"I b'lieve so, but I don't know much about it. I ain't no gossip."

North-land Nick spoke gruffly. Evidently, he did not approve of having so many questions leveled at him, and did not intend to answer them.

The horseman took the hint, and tightened the rein.

"You say the town is near?"

"Only a few rods away."

"Good-day."

"Zactly."

The horseman rode on. He was a man with a good form, and rode his fine horse with ease and grace. In this respect he seemed like a Western man, for those of the East are seldom even respectable riders, but he did not have a Western look in any other respect. He was dressed in plain, substantial garments of newest fashion, and, though naturally of dark complexion, was free from the brown hue given by long acquaintance with open air.

Entering the town he rode slowly, looking attentively at every building by the way, and finally brought up at the hotel.

There he stopped, ordered supper and a room, and wrote his name and address on the register in a bold and easy hand.

The entry was as follows:

"Gideon Murdock, Pointer Plains, Wy."

The landlord read the words mechanically. He had never heard of Pointer Plains, did not know where the town was, and did not care. Hence, he asked no questions.

Mr. Murdock ate supper, asked the landlord to join him in a smoke, and then gave attention to his cigar and—talked. He was a stranger in Jacob's Ladder, he said, but had heard of the place—heard favorable reports.

The landlord's heart warmed, naturally, and he, too, spoke freely. As mining was the great industry, so he dwelt most on the subject of the mines.

"The Bald Eagle is paying the best of any," he explained, anon.

"The owner is a Mr. Holbrook, I believe?"

"Yes."

"He must bless the good luck which sent him here."

"He has cause to, though the mine did not pay at the start. He and his partner almost starved for awhile, but the turn of the tide came, and Holbrook is rich now."

"And the partner?"

"Dead!"

"Did he git rich, too?"

"No; poor Holly died before the gold showed up big."

"His heirs profited by it, I suppose?"

"Ye-es."

"Was he a man of family?"

"He had a wife."

"What has become of her?"

Murdock's voice and manner had been care-

less. Now, there was just the slightest increase of interest—so slight that the landlord did not notice it, or suspect how eagerly the dark-faced young man awaited the reply.

"She married Holbrook!"

The landlord gave the news as a simple fact, but Gideon Murdock abruptly removed his cigar, and had no answer ready. A strange expression had flashed over his face; an expression which told so much that it was well no one was watching him. It betrayed the fact that he was not a disinterested questioner; it betrayed surprise, and a good deal more.

He soon became calm.

"A late event, I suppose?" he questioned, yawning.

"No. It took place in October."

Another brief silence, and then the speaker added:

"Holly had been dead only four months, but none of us blame Mrs. Holly for marrying so soon. She was left penniless, and was only supported by Holbrook's strenuous efforts in the mine. He was Holly's partner and friend, and the natural protector of the widow."

"Of course. When did the mine begin to pay?"

"It was this way: About two weeks after the marriage, the new husband and wife were in the mine together, and he then found a new, rich vein of gold. We have allowed that the marriage brought good luck."

"No doubt."

Murdock agreed readily orally, but this gave no clew to what was in his mind. There were certain reasons why all this seemed very suspicious to him.

"How was Holly liked here?" he continued, after a brief pause.

"Every man in town was his friend."

"He was killed by accident, I believe?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about it. The gold regions have a fascination for me, and all such local history is interesting."

"I see. Well, Holly fell off the cliff along the brow of which winds the trail which leads to their mine. Usually, the partners came home together; that night they did not. The night was very dark, and it is supposed that Holly was careless. He went too far to the right, fell over the rock and was killed on the bed of the canyon below."

"It must have been a severe blow to his wife?"

"Yes; she was a long time in recovering from it."

Murdock smiled slightly. He remembered that the bereaved woman had married a second time only four months later.

"Was Holly's body sent East to his relatives?"

"I don't know that he had any relatives besides his wife; I never heard of any. No; he was buried right over by the tall tree you see yonder—the thirteenth death in town."

"The thirteenth, eh? An unlucky number!"

"I don't see who it's to bring ill-luck on, seeing that Holly is dead."

Gideon did not seek to explain, but, shortly after, went for a walk. His course was east, but, after getting clear of the buildings, he bowed around to the right and finally brought up at the place where he had been told Holly was buried.

He sought for the grave, found it, and read the inscription on the headstone, which had never been changed. He regarded it with manifest emotion.

"Old friend," he murmured, "I never thought your trail would end here, but I am now glad that I came to Jacob's Ladder. Before I leave I hope to prove whether you died by accident or crime. There is more to this case, I believe, than was suspected by those who sent me. A mere affair of money assumes dwarfed proportions in comparison with a possible murder. What is it to me if the widow did keep more than her legal share, if Lemuel was killed? Was he killed? Am I indulging in a wild flight of fancy, or is there grounds for my vague suspicions? I will know if it takes me years to solve the question!"

CHAPTER V.

TAKING A WOLF INTO THE FOLD.

WHEN Gideon Murdock returned to the hotel he picked up a copy of the latest issue of the Razorback Bar Telegram—a newspaper thus named, perhaps, because no telegram had ever been sent to it—which had just arrived on the evening stage.

Chance, or fate, directed his gaze to the following advertisement:

"WANTED:—A secretary and paymaster, by the owner of a mine. Unquestionable references required. Address F. Holbrook, Jacob's Ladder, Wyoming."

Murdock read the advertisement twice, and then arose and went to his room.

The following morning the owner of the Bald Eagle opened his office at the usual hour. Business had so improved with him that he had a superintendent who was fully capable of conducting work at the mine, and Francis did not need to be there all the time. He was needed at

his office in town, more or less, and was to be found there at certain hours.

Time had improved Mr. Holbrook. He had gained flesh, and, with it, a sleekness of appearance very pleasant to behold. He was a generous giver to the church lately started in Jacob's Ladder, and the preacher liked to have Francis in a front pew of a Sunday just on account of his sleekness. It affected the good man so to look upon his parishioner's smooth, placid face and rotund form that he often surprised even himself with his eloquence.

A good man who is both sleek and rich fills a long-felt want in a front pew.

On this morning Mr. Holbrook had been at his office less than a minute when a dark-faced man walked quietly in, politely removed his hat and stood in a respectful attitude.

"Good-morning, sir," saluted Francis.

"Good-morning, sir. Is this Mr. Holbrook?"

"That's my name, sir."

"I have seen your advertisement in the *Telegram* for a paymaster and secretary."

"Ah!"

"Being in need of a situation, I have called to see about it."

"You don't live in town?"

"I was never here until yesterday."

"Do you live near?"

"No. I was never in Wyoming until very recently. I am from Colorado, and have seen some experience as a miner. For the last five years I have been in other business, in St. Louis. If you wish, I shall be glad to show you my references."

Mr. Holbrook did wish it. He had anticipated some trouble in getting just the man he wanted, and the new-comer's whole appearance was in his favor. He was intelligent, well-educated and gentlemanly—qualities which went a long ways in considering his application.

Francis asked him to be seated, and then looked over the recommendations. They were all that could be desired. According to them, Mr. Gideon Murdock was honest, capable, willing, and a thorough business man.

Francis soon arrived at a decision.

"I like these papers, sir," he admitted, "and when, as a mere formality, I have written to the parties whose names are upon them, I think we may consider the compact made. I, however, am not inclined to wait for the slow steps of the mail-carriers. When can you begin work?"

"At once."

"It has been my idea to have my paymaster board and room in my own house. To be frank, I don't want a man who will spend all his spare time with boon companions in the hotel. I want a sober man, one who thinks more of my business than of sky-larking."

"Your ideas are good, sir, and life in a private family would suit me much better than in a hotel."

"And you are all ready for work?"

"Yes."

"Then you shall begin at once."

Francis was pleased. It was very agreeable to have the matter settled so quickly and easily, and he believed he had found a treasure in Murdock. The new paymaster was intelligent, and Francis, who had a strong will of his own, was pleased to note the square jaws and resolute expression of the stranger.

"A man of perseverance and bull-dog grit!" was his unspoken verdict.

Gideon went to work. There were letters to write, books to arrange, and plenty of work to do. He set about it systematically, grasping Holbrook's methods with readiness very pleasant to the latter.

At noon they went to dinner together, and the paymaster met Mrs. Milly Holbrook and Miss Leonis Vane.

The latter had been mentioned by North-land Nick, and Gideon knew her to be Milly's friend. He found her quite as pretty and interesting as the old hunter had said, but she did not interest him one-half as much as the twice-married woman.

He studied Milly intently, but secretly. She seemed to be a woman of amiable and passive nature. Her face was not a strong face, but it had a gentle smile, which told that she was satisfied to let the world roll on about as it pleased.

"If a designing man won her love, she would be a creature of wax in his hands," Gideon thought. "Still, she does not look capable of any great crime. Appearances indicate that she would be afraid of her own shadow, but—appearances are often deceptive."

Leonis Vane was a different person; so different that he wondered at her friendship for Milly. Leonis was bright and sparkling, thoroughly intelligent and—her face spoke as plainly as Milly's, and told of ample spirit and strength of character.

"This girl must love me!" thought Murdock.

"Through her affections lies the road to discoveries in regard to the Holbrooks. I must put my best foot forward, and win Leonis's heart!"

That night, after the paymaster had retired to his room, Francis observed to his wife:

"I have found a treasure in Murdock!"

"I don't like him!" declared Leonis.

"Nevertheless, he is a lucky acquisition to me."

At that moment the paymaster was writing a letter, which was in the following words:

"WARREN HOLLY, Esq.:—

"DEAR SIR:—I am in the town of Jacob's Ladder, and engaged in the work upon which you sent me West. We have not been deceived as to the Bald Eagle Mine; it is the richest in these regions. If your lamented brother had lived until now, he would be a rich man. He died before gold in abundance was found in the mine—so it is said—but I have yet to learn how his half of the property, as it then stood, was disposed of so lightly and airily."

"Circumstances lead me to believe that slow and cautious action is necessary, and I shall proceed accordingly, but do not become impatient; the work shall cost you no more than the sum agreed upon—perhaps not so much."

"Lemuel Holly was a good friend to me when, ten years ago, I, a boy of seventeen, was trying to be a miner far down in Colorado. Possibly, I can now repay the debt; certainly, I shall try my best."

"If he was wronged, the wrong shall be righted, if time, perseverance and resolution can do it. Those who wronged him shall pay the debt in bitterness of spirit, in sorrow—perhaps, in blood!"

"Be patient! Write me no letters, but let me go on in my own way to recover your money, and our just vengeance."

GIDEON MURDOCK.

The writer sealed the letter thoughtfully.

"I dare not explain more, for other eyes than his might see it, but my suspicions, once vague, are taking more definite shape. Lemuel Holly, sure-footed as a mountain sheep, falls to his death over a cliff bordering a well-known path; his widow marries again in four months; and neither she nor the new husband ever returns a penny to Lemuel's blood-relatives. If there is not a crooked spot in this, I am all at sea!"

The next day the paymaster was at his post, polite, ready and capable.

His manner toward Francis, while not in the least deferential or servile, was so courteous that the employer was more than ever pleased.

That evening Mr. Murdock went out for a walk. He had assured himself that, after that first visit to Lemuel's grave, it must be a spot avoided and unseen by him for many days, but some impulse led him there again.

He stood by the grave for several minutes, and then went a few feet away and sat down under one of the trees which stood, guardian-like, on the scene.

Memory went back to the time, ten years before, when he and Holly had been partners in gold-digging, and he was so absorbed in thought that he did not discover the approach of any one else until a second man passed him so near that he could almost have touched the night-wanderer's garments.

This he did not do, and he was glad he had been sitting so quietly when he saw who the wanderer was.

'Twas Francis Holbrook.

The latter went on until he reached Lemuel's grave. There he paused, and stood silent and motionless by the head-stone.

Gideon watched in curiosity. The darkness prevented him from seeing Francis' face, and he felt that he was losing what would interest him most.

What had brought the mine-owner there?

After a pause Francis knelt down and struck a match. As the light flared up he held it close to the inscription. It was an odd thing to do, Murdock thought, and the motive was not clear to him.

The light died out, but Francis remained as he had been. Then the paymaster distinctly heard him speak:

"He is still watching over us!" Accursed sentiment! will it never cease to haunt me?"

He struck the stone with his open hand, and then, evidently impressed by the folly of the act, laughed in an unpleasant key and muttered several words inaudible to Gideon. He arose, but it was not until he had lingered idly for several minutes that he started away toward the town. Murdock watched him out of sight.

"So the inscription grates on our gentleman's nerves! He don't want to be watched by Lemuel. That means something to him—it means a good deal to me!"

CHAPTER VI.

A PITILESS PAIR, AND THEIR DEMAND.

It was the month of September.

Gideon Murdock, paymaster for Francis Holbrook, was in the latter's outer office. Prosperity had continued to smile upon the owner of the Bald Eagle, and he had erected a new building, with two elaborate offices, and now did business in style.

Two persons entered the outer office—a man of about fifty-five; a lady of not over twenty-five.

Murdock rose politely.

"Is Mr. Holbrook in?" asked the male stranger.

"He is, sir," Gideon answered.

"Yonder?"

The speaker motioned toward the door of the inner office as he asked the question.

"Yes, sir. Who shall I say wishes to see him?"

"No one. We will announce ourselves."

Before the paymaster could remonstrate the unknown man crossed the floor and opened the other door without ceremony. His female companion followed closely; both entered the inner office, and one of them closed the door.

Gideon watched in curiosity.

"What's up?" he thought. "There is hostility in their manner. There may be something worth hearing, and I will see if I can learn what it is."

He went close to the door, but that substantial article, the equally substantial walls, and the noise of the street were against him. In the conversation which followed, his prying ears found but little to reward them.

There was no reign of famine where Francis Holbrook was. A thorough business man, he looked up with a model business air when the twain entered, but his appearance changed swiftly.

He started; his color changed; he sat staring at them with an air of consternation.

The male visitor bowed with calm composure. "Good-evening, Mr. Holbrook. We have called on business. Here are our cards."

He laid two bits of pasteboard on the desk. If Francis had looked at them he would have seen that one bore the inscription, "Matthias Haight, Attorney-at-Law," while the second had the brief name of "Vencila Haight."

But Francis was ignoring the man entirely; he was looking at the young woman, and looking with dismay and terror in his face.

"Alive!" he gasped, rather than exclaimed.

"Alive," Matthias Haight calmly answered.

"Husband and wife meet again after four years of separation."

He was the only person of cold composure there, the woman was returning Francis's gaze of terror with one of hatred and triumph.

"The man does not rush to my arms!" she sneered.

"All of which is fortunate for you, my dear."

"Alive!" repeated Francis, blankly.

"Parrot?" snapped Vencila Haight. "Can you say nothing but that?"

"I heard that you had died."

"I am too much alive for your good."

"Alive, and—"

Francis stopped, but his unspoken thought found echo in Vencila's mind, and she finished in harmony with that thought, if not with the spirit of it, and his own words.

"And come to see the second Mrs. Holbrook!"

"There is but one legal Mrs. Holbrook," coldly reminded Matthias.

"Then what is the other woman?"

"Call her Holbrook's fancy."

Francis listened in mute dismay to this flip-pant conversation, which suggested so much more than was actually spoken. It was no idle claim they had made. Seven years before he and Vencila Haight had stood before a minister and been pronounced man and wife. He had thought the tie dissolved by death, but Vencila was there, alive.

And what of Milly?"

This man had the guilt of blood upon his soul, but his love for Milly had never lessened. What of her now? The mental inquiry gave him agony as sharp as though he had not paid for her hand with his soul.

"You will oblige me by finding your tongue and using it," imperturbably added Mr. Matthias Haight, after a pause. "Time is going to waste. You are over your surprise at seeing my niece; now talk like a man of sense."

"What do you want?" asked Francis, huskily.

"It might not be amiss for you to greet your wife with a show of that idiocy that the world calls love."

"She is not my wife!"

"Who is?"

Francis hesitated.

"I know of the woman in your present home," the old lawyer coldly added.

"Vencila has been the same as dead to me for half a decade—she is dead to me. I refuse to acknowledge any claim upon me!"

"How can you help it?"

"I tell you I thought her dead."

"Is that all?"

"Isn't it enough?"

"In law it is nothing. The man who is rash enough to suppose what suits his convenience and marries a second wife, when the first is living, becomes a bigamist. Of this fact the law does take notice."

Francis was silent. As his self-possession gradually returned he saw how hopeless his position was. As Haight said, it was nothing if he supposed Vencila dead; that was his misfortune, not his advantage; he must face the case as it actually was.

He did not need to be told that the visitors' presence there meant war; he knew them of old. Clearly, there was only one course open to him—he must buy their silence. This he did not believe would be difficult; on the contrary, it seemed certain that they were there for that purpose.

He turned to Matthias.

"You must have known, years ago, that Vencila was alive?"

"I did," the lawyer admitted.

"Why did you not inform me?"
 "It was not my business."
 "Did you not know the complication which has occurred was liable to occur?"
 "Yes."
 "Yet, you let me go on blindly."
 "Yes."
 "Why?"
 "Because I had no interest in your affairs."
 "Then why are you here now?"
 "Now, I am interested."
 "Why?"

"Vencila is your wife; I am her attorney. We are here to ask two things: First, an annuity for each of us of one thousand dollars—"

"Name, in one amount, the sum for which you abandon all claims upon me, and forever let me alone. I want it settled at one stroke, and forever."

"You have not heard the second item," Haight calmly observed. "Said item is that you give me and Vencila quarters in your house."

"Buy a house for you, do you mean?"

"I do not; I mean what I said. You have a home; we want to live with you. Understand, we do not ask you to acknowledge publicly that Vencila is your wife, nor will we state that fact. On the contrary, we enter your house merely as visiting friends of yours, and will sacredly hide the secret of the past. To the world, to your second wife, even to you, we will be your friends, outwardly, and no more."

The audacity of this proposal almost took Francis's breath away.

"What! do you think I would introduce you to my wife?" he cried.

"You mean, to the second Mrs. Holbrook. Why not?"

"It would be an outrage!"

"Upon whom?"

"My wife."

"What of it, if she did not suspect the truth—that Vencila was your legal wife?"

"It would be no less an outrage."

"Yet that is our condition."

"I refuse to comply with it!"

"Then," Matthias coldly answered, "I will have you arrested for bigamy inside of the hour!"

Francis did not answer. He was a man of abundant nerve, yet he was overwhelmed by the situation. If his love for Milly had been less strong, and his desire to shield her from all slights and indignities less earnest, he might have grasped eagerly at the way out of the dilemma; but the proposal touched him in his only vulnerable spot, his only point of honor.

If he had been a better man naturally, and if the crime of Babel Run had not been upon his hands, he would not have been more thoughtful of Milly.

His downcast, dismayed expression brought a short mocking laugh from Vencila.

"Our gay Benedict seems upset," she observed.

"Matrimony, like hydrophobia, has its unpleasant features," cynically observed Matthias.

"You ask too much," declared Francis.

"Name the sum, upon the receipt of which you will go away from here forever."

"We have named our terms."

"You shall never enter my house."

"Then you sleep in prison to-night, a branded bigamist!"

Francis looked almost beseechingly at his enemies, but saw no pity in their expressions. Instead, the triumphant smile on Vencila's face told that she was enjoying his consternation.

"I will give you ten thousand dollars to accept my offer," he persisted.

There was no answer.

"What do you say?" he asked.

"Holbrook," icily returned the lawyer, "I never in the past suspected you of being a fool. Don't make me think you one now. You have heard our proposal—the only one we can, or will, make or consider—and it is for you to take your choice. Admit us to your home, or you go at once to the prison-cell of a bigamist. This is our immovable verdict. Which lot do you choose?"

CHAPTER VII.

"THE FOE—THEY COME!"

FRANCIS had to fight ice and fire—a dangerous combination, since in this case, the one would not destroy the other, and such elements might when used as agents literally.

Vencila was a young woman of fierce passions. She hated Francis, and, in her ardor to secure revenge, would have been dangerous under any condition, but through the vehemence of her temper, might have been beaten had she worked alone.

Now, she was not alone; she had Matthias Haight for an ally, and he was a power. If he had ever had passions he had outlived them, and was now cold, cool, cunning and far-sighted. Thirty years' experience as a lawyer had sharpened his naturally sharp wits afresh, and as he would never act, it seemed, from impulse, he was a foe from whom any one might shrink.

Francis knew them of old—knew that Vencila

was passionate, fierce and revengeful; knew that Matthias was pitiless in pressing a point once decided upon.

Despite this, the mine-owner did not yield. He pleaded, argued, and offered bribes. He was rich, and feeling that no sacrifice would be too great if he could get rid of his foes forever, he did not hesitate to offer a large sum if they would go away and leave him and Milly to their happiness.

He struggled in vain; they had fixed their terms before they came, and not for a moment did they yield to his most tempting offers. A foothold in his house, and nothing else, would suit them.

The struggle was long and earnest, but Francis finally sat silent, disheartened and defeated. From the first he had foreseen it, but he had struggled against hope until the folly of further talk became so apparent as to make even him ready to end it.

He knew one of two things must come—instant exposure, and the revelation to all of his townsmen that he was a bigamist, or a reprieve upon the, to him, terrible condition of introducing the plotters to his own home.

Now that other means had failed he caught at the idea of a reprieve. Who knew what might happen? If they were merciless, so was he. If they were cunning, so would he try to be. He was in a town where he had many friends, and they had none! He was powerful, but they had no standing.

Already vague plans of relief were in his mind. When Lemuel Holly was in the way he found means of removing the man.

Could not these people also be removed?

Francis would have been hopeful had he not felt downcast at the idea of deceiving Milly, and introducing such persons to her.

"How are you going to conduct yourself in my house?" he asked.

"As honored guests," Matthias quietly returned.

"Have you no other plans?"

"Our plan is to get a temporary home; we shall not forfeit it by any indiscretion."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"You will not annoy my wife?"

"No."

"Nor hint at anything to arouse her suspicions, or to worry her?"

"We will not. To do this would be to lose foothold at your house, and this is not a part of our desires. We understand that we must be discreet."

"How long do you wish to remain?"

"Perhaps a month; perhaps three months. I don't know. The future must shape itself before we can say positively. At present we are here, without a home. We want shelter until we can arrange for the weeks to come, you see."

"What arrangements have you to make?"

"They are foreign to our association with you."

"Are you sure?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"Confess that you wish to enter my house merely to be revenged upon me."

"Revenge upon you, if you like the word, will please us," the lawyer tranquilly responded.

"We don't deny that, and we don't care how much you resent our presence. You see that I am frank. Beyond this lies the line of prudence, and you and we must alike stand upon it. If we quarrel, or if either betrays the other, life together becomes out of the question. Expulsion from the house would follow, and, if we were sent away in anger, we should retaliate by denouncing you as a bigamist. You will see how necessary it is for all of us to be on our good behavior."

It was impossible to get any clew to the lawyer's actual feelings from his dry, cool manner, but, in spite of his practical, if not friendly, words, Francis experienced the keenest dread.

He turned to Vencila.

"Do you agree to all this?" he asked.

"Why, certainly," she returned, lightly.

"Do you make the same pledges?"

"Yes."

"Understand, my wife must not be annoyed."

"I know how solicitous you are for the happiness of your wives!" she retorted.

"There is a difference in wives."

"Thanks, awfully."

"Haight, do you answer for your niece?"

"I do; Vencila will be prudent."

"When do you wish to go to the house?"

"We are all ready."

Francis was not ready, but the supper hour was drawing near, and he knew he might as well take the disagreeable step at once. He felt utterly crushed. A few hours before he had been a man who, blessed, if the word might be used, with a happy home, riches and power, felt himself most fortunate. Now—where did he stand?

Utter ruin confronted him.

He rose with slowness of motion which suggested that the weight of years had just been put upon him suddenly.

"Follow me!" he directed, somberly.

Vencila smiled triumphantly. She could see how he suffered, and she exulted over the fact as only a low nature can. As Francis suspected, the gaining of a foothold was only the beginning of war, and she intended to make him drink to the dregs of the cup of bitterness.

At that moment some erratic fancy brought to the mine-owner's mental gaze the grave of Lemuel Holly, and upon the head-stone he seemed to see the last sentence of the inscription, "He is still watching over us!"

It was a most untimely thought, and it gave additional force to Francis's distress.

They left the inner office, passed through the outer one and went down the street. Gideon Murdock looked after them thoughtfully. He knew there had been a quarrel, and much ill-feeling of unusual magnitude in the next room, but had not been able to learn the cause.

"Holbrook has lost," he decided, from the transient view of their faces. "What is it about? They seemed too much in earnest to be talking of business affairs. Well, I may learn later, but I don't see that it concerns me."

The paymaster remained at his post an hour longer, and then locked the office and went to supper.

When he neared Holbrook's house he had a surprise; the woman he had seen at the office and Milly were sitting together by one of the front windows. This was unexpected, for the affair at the office, he was aware, had been no ordinary disagreement, and when persons quarreled in earnest, one is not likely to invite the other to his home.

Entering the house, Murdock was introduced to Vencila and Matthias.

With the lack of formality and pride of station peculiar to the West, the Holbrooks, in admitting the paymaster to their residence, had always made him an equal, and as such he had always figured. Now, as formerly, he was given the full freedom of association with the guests of the family, unhampered by his position as an employee.

Despite all this, he was not a favorite with either Milly or Francis. Why this was so neither could have explained. At times Francis thought him a fine fellow; at other times a word or look from Murdock would make his employer feel vaguely uneasy.

Milly had even less tangible cause for her dislike, for the paymaster's manner toward her had been irreproachable, but dislike him she did, strongly and thoroughly.

Several times she had urged Francis to send him to the hotel to live, and, once, Francis had hinted at the idea to Gideon, but the latter had ignored the hint, and the matter was not pressed.

In a business sense, the mine-owner thought he had a treasure in his employee, and, hence, had always treated him very well.

Such was Murdock's position, and there was nothing to hinder him from talking as freely with the Haight as if he owned one-half of the Bald Eagle.

He did talk freely, on every-day subjects, and Francis acted as if his coming was a relief. He and Milly were under no restraint, and conversation flowed without any departure from outward channels.

Murdock did not try to make one of the party for any great length of time. He saw that his employer was ill at ease, but Milly was just the reverse, and, plainly, pleased to have one of her own sex there. Vencila had abandoned the vindictive air shown at the office, and was womanly and agreeable.

From this the paymaster saw that, whatever might be the trouble, Milly was to be kept ignorant—at least for a time.

Not caring to take part in trivial talk, Murdock left the house and walked slowly down the street. He had been at Jacob's Ladder long enough to know every one there, and he had his share of friends in the general use of the term.

None of these, however, knew much about the paymaster. He had never been inclined to talk about his past life, and even those who liked him best were kept at a distance.

Not less well did he hide the object of his presence in the town. They saw only the careful clerk, watchful of Holbrook's interests, and did not suspect that he was working steadily for one purpose.

On this occasion he walked along, hardly conscious of where he was going, until he had reached the hills to the northwest of the town. There he sat down upon a rock and remained looking at the lights and houses below. Almost all of the town was there. Half a dozen dwelling-houses had been built in a gulch above, but Nature compelled nearly all residents to keep within the bounds of the valley.

Gideon had been at his post only a few moments, when he saw some one else toiling up the steep path. At first this interested him in no degree, but two discoveries followed.

The climber was a woman, and was Leonie Vane.

This meant a good deal to Gideon, and he rose when she had nearly reached him.

"Good-evening, Miss Vane!" he said, simply. The girl had started, but she grew quiet on

seeing who had thus risen in her path. Curtly she returned his greeting, and would then have passed on without a word, but his gaze wandered to the basket she carried, and he added:

"Will you allow me to help you up the hill by carrying your burden?"

"I need no help," was the quick reply.

"But the way is rough and steep. Allow me!"

Leonis had moved on, and plainly shown that his assistance was not wanted, but he kept at her side, and now quietly relieved her of the basket. She yielded it without opposition, but in a manner that spoke as plainly as words, of her unwillingness to be indebted to him.

CHAPTER VIII.

GIDEON MAKES HIMSELF OBNOXIOUS.

"I PRESUME you are out on an errand of charity," observed Murdock, as pleasantly as if he had not received a rebuff.

"One of the poorest of the miners is injured. The family is in want, and I am carrying something to his wife," replied Leonis, briefly.

"You seem to be the good angel of the town." "I'm not!"

The girl spoke curtly, but Murdock was not to be discouraged so easily.

"People often tell me of your good deeds."

"People would do well to attend to their own affairs."

The paymaster had not exaggerated as to Leonis's reputation. Her intelligence and energy fitted her for a wider field of action than the mining town afforded. She would have been lonely there had she found no outlet for her energy, but did find it in helping the needy. Among them she was regarded as the most noble and amiable of women, and, indeed, she used every one well unless it was Gideon Murdock.

She had always disliked him, and a disposition on his part to seek her society had led to many a sharp speech from her. These he had thus far borne without perceptible resentment, but without softening her antipathy to him.

Leonis was near the end of her journey when the paymaster joined her on this occasion, and the miner's house was soon reached. There she took the basket again. She did not ask Murdock in, and, though she was somewhat ashamed of herself, did not thank him, but said a curt good-night and went in.

He was banished, but he accepted the situation calmly—indeed, his manner did not show that he was conscious of any neglect.

He went a few yards away, lighted a cigar and sat down. Again he watched the lights of the town, and his manner was contented. Time passed until an hour had elapsed. He knew from previous observation that Leonis was not in the habit of staying so long where she was not needed as a nurse, and must have seen in the former fact evidence that she did not want to encounter him again, but it did not seem to annoy or trouble him.

At last she emerged from the house.

When she neared him he rose quietly.

"How did you find the miner?" he asked.

"I did not find him," was the ungracious response.

"No?"

"I did not look for him."

"I referred to his bodily condition, but I dare say it is a small matter," Murdock calmly observed. "Will you take my arm going down the trail?"

"No. I will not trouble you to accompany me, at all."

"It is no trouble; I am going that way."

They went down the path in silence a few steps further, and then Leonis suddenly paused. She turned and confronted Murdock.

"Why do you persist in following me?" she abruptly demanded, strong resentment in her voice.

"The hour is late, and there are men hereabouts who are not law-abiding," was the matter-of-fact reply.

"Have I asked for your company?"

"No."

"Do you know that I don't want it?"

"I act from a sense of duty."

"You anger me beyond measure!" Leonis cried. "Why do you talk about 'duty,' when I have said that I don't want your company?"

"I only wish to protect you," Murdock answered, with outward stolidity hardly in keeping with the way of an intelligent man.

"I have been thought to hate no one," Miss Vane pursued, warmly, "but you are enough to make one break all the commandments. Do you know I have never liked you?"

"Why should you dislike me?"

"Why does the sun rise and set?"

"Astronomy does not concern me now. What have I ever done to make you dislike me?"

"I don't know as I can name anything, but I don't like you."

"Why not?"

"You are enough to destroy the patience of a saint!" cried Leonis. "Can I tell why I don't like you? What does it matter, anyhow? If any one don't like me, and will say as much, I'll keep away from that person."

"What if the case is reversed, and somebody likes you?" Murdock inquired.

"Somebody had better take his liking elsewhere. As for you, sir, I don't want to be harsh, but you have a way of haunting me that I don't like. Since I visit Milly so often we have necessarily met, you and I; but I see no earthly use why we should talk. I don't like you!"

The girl's voice had softened, she did not feel wholly at ease, but had long realized that something must be done to discourage Murdock.

She had always disliked him, while it was equally clear to her that he had a fancy for her.

Something must be done to check it, and to keep him away from her.

"Yet, you can give no reason?" the paymaster phlegmatically asked.

"None."

"Why should you condemn me?"

"I don't. Bless me! how stupid you are! I don't care a fig for you, you see. Condemn you? Pshaw! you are all well enough, as long as you keep away from me!"

"You have come to Holbrook's—"

"Not to see you."

"Yet, you saw me. Am I to blame?"

Leonis lost all patience.

"You do not talk like a man of sense; your answers are positively childish. Either you lack the full measure of brains usually accorded man, or you are deliberately mocking me. Which is it?"

"I assure you that you have my highest respect in all ways—"

"Then show that it's worth something. The English language has always been sufficient to enable me to express my opinions and wishes before; I hope it may be now. Mr. Murdock, your path and mine lie separate in life. I am traveling mine; I want you to travel yours. Do you understand?"

Leonis felt her cheeks flush as she spoke. She was ashamed to speak so plainly to a man whose only known offense had been the seeking of her company, but she felt obliged to do it.

From the first his presence had given her an uneasy, vague feeling of dread and fear. Why it was so she did not know, but the fact remained.

Hence, she wanted Gideon to keep away from her, and, as a hint would not avail, plain words must be used.

"I see," he answered, quietly.

"We part here."

"Why not at the door of your house?"

"I prefer to go alone."

She started, and he did not try to stop her, but, when she had gone a few steps, she suddenly turned.

"Mr. Murdock, I hope you will not blame me too much—"

"Of course not," he returned, calmly.

"I fear I have been very unladylike, but I had to speak to the point."

"I see."

"So if I used strong language, don't consider the words. Think only of the sentiments. If we are strangers we need not be enemies."

"No."

The man's unfailing composure amazed Leonis not a little. She had never before suspected him of lack of intelligence, but a clod could not have been more unmoved then. She went down the path feeling angry, ashamed and chagrined, and the half-formed idea of the previous moment again came to her.

"I do believe he was mocking me—it would be just like him!" she thought.

His voice rose behind her:

"Better let me see you safely home."

"Not a step!"

She flung back the retort and went all the faster. She had seen no inclination on his part to follow her, but she wanted to make sure.

She reached the foot of the declivity and breathed more freely. The houses of the town were near, and she would soon have companions other than the dark-faced paymaster.

She had them sooner than she expected.

Two human forms abruptly appeared before her in the darkness, and the rough, strong hand of a man grasped her arm.

"Hyar's the rose o' the hills!" exclaimed one, "an' we're jest the honey-bees ter draw the sweetness from her lips. Wade in, pard!"

Throwing his arm around her waist the speaker essayed to press his own lips to Leonis's, but she uttered a half-muffled cry and, struggling, frustrated the attempt for the time.

The second ruffian came to his comrade's aid.

"Carry her off, Cale!" he urged; "I know her, an' we won't git a sweeter prize in many a day. She'll bring a big ransom."

He pinioned her arms by winding his own around her, and she was rendered perfectly helpless, but a change was at hand. Even in her alarm Leonis heard a sound beyond them all, then the first rough suddenly doubled up, as though ambitious of imitating a pocket-knife, and went down with a heavy sound.

Ruffian Number Two took the alarm and turned, but was only in time to receive a blow which sent him sprawling on the ground.

Then, with both her enemies thus prostrated, Leonis saw Gideon Murdock standing over them.

They were not men to yield a point tamely,

and they tried to rise and renew the trouble, but the paymaster met each as he was half up, and another touch of his clinched fist caused them to keep a humble and lowly attitude.

"With your permission!" remarked Gideon, calmly, and without further ceremony, he took Leonis's arm and led her away.

This time she did not object. Her heart was beating rapidly and heavily, and she was too much frightened to think of any prejudice. Her sole ambition was to get away from the men who had proved themselves so dangerous, and she went meekly by Gideon's side.

He did not speak further, but, when they had gone far enough to be safe, and the houses of Jacob's Ladder were around them, the normal condition returned.

She had been saved from great danger, and saved by the odious paymaster. This fact flashed upon her, and it came like a blow. If any other person had been the rescuer she would have known how to thank him, and that, too, in a model manner, but to be indebted to Murdock, the man she hated and had so recently misused—

Her face flushed with mortification, but she made an effort and found her voice.

"Mr. Murdock, I—I owe you thanks," she faltered.

"Don't mention it," he indifferently replied.

"You saved me—bravely."

"Not at all."

"I am very much obliged."

"It is a trivial matter."

She felt the color deepen in her face. After she had humbled herself he persisted in treating the whole expression as he had treated her late reproof—as if it was of no consequence whatever. Surely no other man had ever lived who was as disagreeable as this dark-faced paymaster. True, indifference had not marked his manner until she had stung him with feminine venom again and again, but indifference now went hand in hand with persistent attention.

Even his service could not atone for his sin, and she did not speak again until her own home was reached.

Then she compelled herself to break the silence.

"Those men were dangerous. They will remember this in you," she remarked.

"I hope so."

"I mean they will try to do you harm."

"They are welcome."

"See that they don't strike you in the back."

"Oh! I reckon they are only playful."

"Playful! Is that what you call their attack on me?"

"I judge that they wanted some amusement."

Mr. Murdock spoke in a calm, candid way, but he angered Leonis again. So the indignity to her was only "playful amusement!"

He turned quickly away.

"Thank you! Good-night!"

Entering the house she hastened to her room. When she had made a light it fell upon cheeks flushed with indignation.

"The most offensive man I ever knew!" she declared.

CHAPTER IX.

NICK SEES A FAMILIAR FACE.

Two days later, as Leonis sat by the window, a tall, angular man in old-fashioned garments approached the house. He was the same person whom Gideon Murdock had seen by the trail when he first approached Jacob's Ladder—the old hunter whose appearance made him seem so much like the link between the past and present.

North-land Nick had not passed an active summer. Even when he called himself well he still felt the effects of the injury which, in the spring, had put him so near to death's door and made Leonis his nurse, and he had wandered around the adjacent mountains, often calling at Jacob's Ladder.

On the present occasion his face lighted up at sight of Leonis, and he hastened to greet her.

"Hullo, Cherry Cheeks!" he exclaimed, in his rough, hearty way.

"Why, Nick, is it you?" she answered. "I'm delighted to see you. Will you come in?"

"Will I? Will a hungry hoss eat oats? Come in? Why, sartain! I'm hyer fer that purpose!"

He entered the house and sat down near the girl.

Leonis was accustomed to call the big border-man her "tame grizzly," and not only did the name suit him, but it fitted to a charm. Nick was nothing if not grim. A good heart beat under his rough hunting-frock, but so far out of sight that many persons denied that it existed. He was rough of appearance, and rough of speech. He had never cultivated the art of politeness, and, always abrupt and curt, he often gave serious offense to those not positively his friends by remarks both rude and sharp.

If he was a grizzly, Leonis had, indeed, tamed him. He was grateful for her care when he was ill, and had repaid it with all possible kindness.

More than that, he actually loved her in his rough way.

He now set down his rifle, rolled a big lump of tobacco over in his mouth and abruptly announced:

"Goin' North!"

"You are?"

"You bet!"

"Why?"

"Can't breathe hyer. 'Tain't no place fer a man with brains, though 'twill do fer dudes an' dandies. Too many folks. Place fer North-land Nick is in the North."

"Winter is coming—"

"Yes, an' it's time fer me ter get home. The grizzlies will miss me, amazin'. Why, I dunno, as any grizzly up thar has had a good fight sence I went away. Want ter get home an' tickle their ribs with my knife—the grizzlies' ribs, I mean."

"And you are really going back to your life of solitude?"

"Yes, unless some man has intruded on my premises. Ef he has, I'll thrash him like blazes, an' tell him ter git. Me an' the grizzlies must hev that thar place all to ourselves."

"You are a strange man."

"I'm a man o' brains, an' fer sech the comp'ny o' man ain't no good. My valley 'way up on the high ridge o' the Rockies is about forty miles long, an' me an' the grizzlies own it ter-gether. This is our title-deed!"

He touched his rifle.

"Suppose strangers should come?"

"They'll get out quicker nor they got in!"

North-land Nick brought his broad hand down heavily on his knee, and his grim old face looked ominous. In the singular mixture of roughness and devotion Leonis had seen in his nature she had often been led to wonder what capabilities were within him.

He never boasted, but snubbed mankind right and left, and gave out that he was ready to fight any one who did not like his way.

As a rule, the miners of Jacob's Ladder disliked and feared him, and Francis Holbrook had once spoken of warning him out of town, but Leonis's intercession had prevented further steps.

What Nick would have said had he known of the project she did not know; she was glad he had never heard of it.

"Shall you be gone all winter?" she now asked.

"Shall I?"

Nick spoke with force, and then, after a pause, added:

"Why, ef it wa'n't ter stock up with ammunition I wouldn't never come out o' the Grizzly Ranges. It's the only decent place fer a man o' brains. By the same token I wouldn't never be seen in this town ag'in ef it wa'n't fer you. I reckon I ain't all grizzly—not all brains—an' I feel quite a weakness in my left buzzom fer you. But them Ranges—why, gal, it's the place fer old Northland Nick, an' thar he intends ter build his camp-fire an' let his light shine."

"We all have our way of living."

"All but men who wear b'iled shirts; they ain't got no way, but jest live 'cause Natur' knows it's a sin ter die with a white shirt on. Now, thar's that man Murdock. Ef he hadn't wore a white shirt I should 'a' said thar was some good in him, fer his face is strong; but when you tol' me he was a mean skunk I was ready ter b'lieve it. The white shirt settled it!"

"He may not be all bad."

"Oh! he is."

"Can you prove it?"

"I kin."

"How?"

"By you—you said so!"

His confident assertion might have made Leonis smile had she not remembered the service done her by the paymaster. Much as she disliked Murdock she could not forget that he had aided her at a critical moment.

Before more could be said she chanced to look out of the window, and then exclaimed:

"Here comes another caller; a Miss Vencila Haight, who has recently come to this town— I met her at Milly Holbrook's. You must see her."

Nick had reached for his rifle, anxious to avoid the meeting, but the other caller was at the door. He shook his gray head and kept his seat.

Leonis met Vencila at the entrance. The latter, as has been said, could be agreeable when she wished to, and she had been prudent. Dropping the sneering, erratic manner which had distinguished her at Holbrook's office, she had made a fairly good impression on Leonis at the past meeting.

She was ushered in and duly introduced:

"Miss Haight, this is North-land Nick, a mighty modern Nimrod," Leonis explained.

Nick raised his shaggy brows. He kept his seat, and would not have risen for the President, or that august person's wife, but his eyes were never idle.

Vencila murmured a few formal sentences, and sunk into a chair with a sigh.

She and her hostess indulged in a few common-place remarks, during the utterance of which Nick was unnoticed. Then Leonis chanced to glance at him.

What she saw surprised her.

The old hunter was never an amiable-looking man, but, now, he appeared almost ferocious. His brows were contracted until the hirsute growth stood out porcupine-like, and he was glaring at Vencila strangely. That young woman, herself, turned just then and saw the look, and it brought a half-stifled cry and a nervous movement from her.

"You frighten Miss Haight, Nick!" exclaimed Leonis.

"Hum!" muttered the hunter, vaguely.

"You really look like a pirate."

"Thar be pirits."

"Are you one?"

"Pirits look all ways."

Nick was very non-committal, but he allowed his fierce expression to die away. He turned his gaze from Vencila to some object out of doors, and fell to stroking his bushy beard with energy.

As he did not apologize for his piratical expression Leonis felt obliged to do so, and, knowing that Nick would endure almost anything from her, she made a playful reference to him as a human grizzly, and tried to do away with what had gone before, but the visitor did not seem to recover from the shock.

Nick did not offer to shorten his call, so Vencila shortened hers and soon went away.

Then the hunter wheeled his chair around abruptly.

"Friend o' yourn, eh?"

"Yes," Leonis returned.

"All yer friends o' the same sort?"

"What 'sort' is she?"

"Bad!"

"By what do you judge?"

"Seen her afore?"

"Where?"

"In the felon's dock!"

"No!"

"Tell yer, yes! Can't fool me; same gal. Knowed her minute I seen her hyar. Bad lot!"

"Surely, you must be wrong. She is a friend of Mr. Francis Holbrook's—"

"Don't keer ef she's a royal duke! Same gal! Don't I know? You bet; these ol' peepers o' mine don't git fooled easy. Not fer Isaac!"

Nick pounded his knee as if he had a spite against it, and Leonis thought it wise to ask for an explanation.

"'Twas two year ago, down in Colorado," the hunter continued. "I was in some mighty small, measly town, the name o' which is gone out o' my reck'lection, an' seein' summut was goin' on in the hall, I meandered in myself. I seen a court goin' on, an' a gal was the pris'ner."

"'Wot's she did? I asked of a man."

"Stole a boodle," sez t'other feller."

"She don't look it," sez I."

"She's a she-devil," sez he."

"Don't see no horns," sez I."

"You'd feel 'em, ef she was arter you," sez he. "She's the worst female desperado this side the Mississipp."

"I didn't feel no great interest in the case, an' I left an' went about my business. I had some things to buy, an' I got 'em an' left town. Afore I went I heard it ginerally said on the streets that she was found guilty, and the vardick seemed ter please all. Then I hustled out o' the town, an' ain't never been back. That measly female was her I seen hyer!"

"Surely, you are mistaken," urged Leonis.

"Not fer Isaac!"

Nick spoke with emphasis which could not but affect Leonis. She knew he was observing and shrewd, and, ordinarily, would have relied greatly upon his opinion, but it was claiming a good deal to assert that Mr. Francis Holbrook's lady friend was a criminal.

"It ain't my funeral," the hunter added, "but I should be wantin' in duty ef I failed ter warn yer. You did me a right good turn—saved the ol' man's life, in fack—an' he won't never fail ye."

"It is very strange."

"It'll be stranger ef she don't try ter hurt you, afore she leaves town."

Nick rose as he spoke.

"I'll be around hyer a bit longer," he added, "an' ef you need any help, let the grizzly-bear ranger know it. He'd like a tussle in yer service—he would, by thunder!"

The big hunter had picked up his rifle, and he now thumped the butt upon the floor with force which almost made the chairs dance.

He walked to the door, turned and gave a last emphatic warning:

"Look out fer her, or she'll do ye up!"

And then he left the house.

CHAPTER X.

A SHOCK FOR THE EX-WIDOW.

THE Haight, uncle and niece, had been at Holbrook's a week.

Milly called upon Leonis.

"You look troubled," observed Miss Vane.

"I am," Milly admitted. "I am troubled, angry and puzzled, and all on account of our guests."

"What about them?"

"I wish they were a thousand miles away. I was never so disgusted with any one before."

I'd like to know how long I am to be persecuted by them."

"Persecuted?"

"It is nothing else," Milly declared. "I have avoided making complaint in your hearing, for I thought I should soon be free from them, but forbearance has ceased to be a virtue. The old lawyer is not so disagreeable, though I don't like him at all, but Vencila is a tiger-cat."

"I confess I don't like her."

"You don't know the woman. When she first came she was all well enough, and I rather enjoyed having some one to talk with when I would otherwise have been alone, but she has changed. That woman has more natural deviltry in her than a dozen women ought to have!"

Tears of anger and humiliation stood in the speaker's eyes, and Leonis saw that it was no trivial matter that troubled her.

The last assertion, too, was significant. Leonis had not repeated North-land Nick's story, for she had not been able to credit it, but what he had said now recurred to her vividly. Was it possible that he was right?

"What has she done?" Leonis asked.

"There are some things that can't be made plain," Milly returned. "It is so with this case. Vencila Haight has grown impertinent to me; she assumes privileges no guest should expect; she is first peevish and then hilariously gay, all to an extreme; she snubs me, gives herself airs of superiority over me, deals out cutting sarcasm to me, and," the speaker added, her cheeks flushing, "is making love to Francis!"

"Surely, he does not care for her?"

"He says he doesn't."

"You have eyes; what do they tell you?"

"Much—nothing. At times I think he loves her; at times it almost seems he is afraid of her."

"Have you spoken to him about it?"

"I asked him when she was going away, and, when he showed hesitation and confusion, accused him of being in love with her."

"When did he say?"

"He denied it strongly."

"I think you can rely upon Francis."

"Then why don't he take my part when he sees her abuse me? Our lady is going at a fast gait, I tell you. She makes free all over the house; interferes with its management; makes innovations, and calls upon Francis to uphold her. He does it, too. She assumes airs of superiority, as I said before, treats me as an inferior, and is actually forcing me into a subordinate position in my own house. And when I appeal to Francis he only bids me wait patiently and they will soon be gone."

"So they will."

"How do you know?"

"Why, they are only guests."

"Perhaps, but Vencila often refers to the coming winter, and just as if she were to be here."

Leonis was silent.

"I have avoided speaking to you about this," Milly added, "but I must ease my mind to some one. That woman has turned my house into a place of misery."

"Relief will come," Leonis sympathetically answered. "I know Francis is devoted to you, and he will not endure it to see you slighted. He is so thoughtful of others' feelings that he may be slow to resent your wrongs, but his anger will be all the more severe when he moves."

"I am disappointed in Francis," declared Milly, fretfully. "He is not—as Lemuel was!"

It was the first time Leonis had ever heard her friend make a comparison of Holly and Francis.

"Lemuel never let the least thing trouble me, but stood between me and trouble like a rock. I wonder if this is a judgment upon me for marrying so soon after he died?"

It was a chance speculation, made under the impulse of the moment. Never before had the weak-minded widow of Lemuel Holly had any qualms of conscience because of that hasty marriage. She had none when she began to speak the sentence she last uttered, but her own chance, impulsive words, spoken because she was distressed, chagrined, and angry at Francis, affected her singularly.

Had her last marriage been a just marriage? She had felt no especial liking for Francis, but, too indolent to work, too cowardly to face the rough side of life, too much bound up in herself to think of the dead, she had gladly seized the chance to unite her fortunes with those of a man who would support her.

She would have accepted almost any man who would take care of her, but, though she did not love Francis, she had been glad that it was he who gave her a chance to marry again. He was polite, intelligent, and good-looking.

Milly had rejoiced over the event, but now, after so long a time, the question came forcibly: Had she done right to forget Lemuel Holly so soon, and rush to a second marriage?

Truly, trouble is a great quickener of the human conscience!

Leonis had had her opinion of the hasty marriage, as will be explained later, but she was as practical and strong-minded as Milly was weak

and irresolute. Milly was married, and it was folly to look to the past for trouble.

So Leonis acted the consoler in due form. Despite the difference in their natures, she was devoted to Milly, and fully sympathized with her in her troubles. The visitor grew more cheerful gradually, and went home in a happier frame of mind.

At the door she had a fresh shock.

As she reached that point a man came out who, to honorable persons, was the most offensive resident of Jacob's Ladder. His name was Percy Sinclair—or so he called himself—and he was a professional gambler. He was young and handsome, but his record in the town was of the worst type.

Now, Mr. Sinclair lifted his hat gracefully to Milly, but received no recognition in return. No respectable woman or man ever did notice him on the street, when it could be avoided, though there were men who had sat down at a table with him, in private, and risen only to leave their money in the gambler's hands.

Milly was astonished. What had the man been doing at her house?

She asked the question of the first servant she encountered after entering.

"He has been calling upon Miss Haight," was the answer.

"Sinclair called on her?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"On business?"

"I don't know; she received him as if it was a friendly visit, and they have been very gay."

Milly's face flushed.

"Send Miss Haight here," she directed.

Milly's powers of endurance had given way, and she determined to bring a crisis about at once—indeed, she was rather glad the chance had been vouchsafed her. She sat down in the parlor and waited grimly until the servant returned, but the latter came with a message which dumfounded her mistress.

"Miss Haight says if you want to see her, you will have to come where she is!"

"Is she busy, or ill?"

"No. She's lying down, reading."

"Repeat her exact words!"

"I did give them, but—" the servant hesitated, and slowly added: "she spoke in a very impudent way."

"You can go, Emma."

Milly only waited until the girl was out of sight; then she went to Vencila's room. The latter's independent message had added to Milly's indignation, and she was literally on the war-path.

The door of Vencila's room was open, and that young woman was lying at her ease. She did not look up from her book when her hostess entered.

"Miss Haight, did Emma give you my message?" Milly demanded.

Vencila languidly turned a page.

"Yes," she answered, indolently.

"Why didn't you come to the parlor?"

"Because I didn't want to!"

"But you knew I wanted you to."

"What of it?"

"What of it? You use respectful language!"

"Oh, bother! Let me alone, will you?"

"Miss Haight, you have had a caller."

"What is that to you?"

"A good deal. I cannot say how much you know about Percy Sinclair, but everybody here knows his reputation well. He is a gambler, blackleg, and social outcast."

"Yes?"

"Yes, and you have received him as a friend."

"What of it?"

"Is that the company you choose?"

"I don't know that you need concern yourself about my company."

"I have need, and urgent need, too. No respectable house in town is open to Percy Sinclair, and to admit him would be to ruin one's reputation. I cannot, will not have him here. I am mortified beyond expression to know he has been here once; it must not happen again. Henceforth, you must keep the man away, or yourself leave this house!"

Milly was thoroughly angry, and all she had said was uttered in keeping with that feeling. Vencila had been alternately indifferent and flippant, and had kept on with her reading steadily, or pretended to, but she now put down the book, turned her face toward Milly and deliberately remarked:

"When you get to be my boss you can dictate whom I shall, and shall not, receive. Until then, I shall receive just whom I please!"

CHAPTER XI.

WRITHING UNDER THE LASH.

THE gauntlet of war was thrown down, and it did not find Milly prepared. In Vencila's voice she read the deliberate purpose to defy her, and her courage did not prove equal to the emergency. Always weak, she could meet an ordinary occasion well enough, but not a bold defiance like this.

Her voice went with her courage, and there was brief silence, during which Vencila watched her composedly, but she rallied in a measure after a few painful moments.

"Do you know whose house you are in?"

"Yes."

"And you persist in defying me?"

"I shall receive what company I like."

"Not under my roof!"

"No?"

"You must leave here!"

"How do you know?"

"How do I know? You must be mad to ask that question. There is a way to get rid of unwelcome guests; even in this town there is law, and it shall be used, if necessary. If you leave quietly you will spare yourself the humiliation of being ejected."

Vencila smiled confidently.

"I shall go when I get ready, and not before!" she asserted.

Milly stood aghast. This was rebellion with a vengeance, and she was as incapable of reply as though she had been struck dumb. As bad as her opinion of Vencila had been she did not dream that the girl would have the hardihood to go so far.

When she could command her voice she replied:

"We will see!"

"All right, my lily of the valley. Did you ever read French novels? It's charming recreation, and you shall have this to amuse yourself when I get through."

Miss Haight had turned to her book, and Milly did not answer her. Instead, the latter retreated to the parlor.

She had felt incapable of struggling with the defiant guest, but solitude brings courage to the weak, at times, and her anger rose higher yet. When a woman is insulted, defied and mocked in her own house the outrage falls but little short of the falling of the heavens.

Milly could not endure to wait Francis's return, and, after a period of indignant thought, she again attired herself for the street and hastened to the office.

Mr. Gideon Murdock was in the outer room, as usual, and he bowed very politely to his employer's wife. Short and unceremonious was the nod he received in return. She entered the private office.

"What's up?" wondered the paymaster. "Our fair mistress is disturbed in mind. Has the retribution begun?"

Milly found her husband alone. He was not busy at his desk; whether his mind dwelt upon business matters she did not know, or stop to inquire, but it was certain that she had caught him with a fixed, serious, even gloomy expression of meditation.

He brightened up at sight of her, and, welcoming her cordially, set a chair. He loved her just as well as when they were married, and she had now brought sunshine to him.

The light went out suddenly.

"Francis," she began, abruptly, "when are the Hights going to leave us?"

The question plunged him back into gloom.

"Well, my dear, I—I haven't heard them say."

"They must go at once!"

"Eh?"

"They must be ejected, bag and baggage!"

"But I—I don't understand."

"Vencila has insulted, abused, outraged, scorned and defied me!"

If Milly could have thought of more synonyms she would have used them, but she had said enough to upset Francis thoroughly. He had been expecting a tempest at the house, and it had come. Nevertheless, he had to appear ignorant, and did so to the best of his ability.

"What has happened?" he asked.

"That woman has broken loose from all trammels of decency and abused me shamefully."

"I am surprised," asserted the mine-owner.

"I want her sent flying, at once."

"But they will go soon, anyhow."

"She is talking about what she will do here next winter. Does that look like it?"

"She must be jesting."

"You have tried to explain her insolence away before this, but explanations and excuses will avail no longer. That woman has to-day received as a friend and guest a man whose very presence is a disgrace. I happened to come home and see him as he was leaving our house, and I spoke to her about it. She met me with defiance, insults and contempt!"

Milly's indignation was increasing, and her flushed face told Francis that it was no ordinary trouble.

"Who was the man?" he asked.

"Percy Sinclair."

The mine-owner was startled. Before that day he had discovered that the Hights' promise to be on their good behavior had been only a trick to gain entrance to the house, and that Vencila, at least, did not intend to abide by it, but the audacity of the latest step surprised even him.

He correctly suspected that Sinclair, the gambler, had been introduced only to defy and degrade the master of the house and his wife.

Milly saw that she had made an impression.

"What have you to say to that?" she demanded.

"Surely, Miss Haight does not know the kind of man he is."

"She does, and exulted in the fact. She insulted and defied me."

"I will tell her just what he is."

"That is not the point. I don't care how much she associates with him—indeed, I wish they would elope together to the moon. What I wish to express is the fact that I can no longer endure life with Vencila Haight under our roof. Her impertinence is terrible. I have endured it as long as I can, and now something must be done. It is for you to act; I told her she must leave, and she answered that she would go when she got ready, not before."

"She did?"

"Yes."

"That is strange."

"No, it is not; that woman is so full of the spirit of evil that she is capable of anything. How could you ever have made friends with her, of old?"

"She seemed all right, then."

"She's all wrong, now."

"I will speak to her."

"Speak to her! I tell you she has vilely insulted me. She must leave the house!"

"But prudence—"

"Prudence?"

"I mean, harmony requires that the affair be smoothed over—"

"Do you want to protect her in abusing your wife?"

Milly had grown weary of his dallying course, and her anger now flamed up hotly. Jealousy, too, naturally had its hour.

"Perhaps you prefer to send me away, and keep her!" Milly added.

The wretched mine-owner was deep in trouble. He was hemmed in on all sides, and knew not which way to turn. The flash of jealousy was the final touch. He hated Vencila Haight with fervor unknown to Milly's weak nature, but feared her even more.

He set about quieting the storm. He could see only one way, and he tried to improve it.

He was under some obligations to Matthias Haight for helping him in the past, he stated, plunging into fiction, and did not like to offend the old lawyer for the sake of the silly young woman. True, she was a model of womanhood enslaved by ill temper and worse taste, but the matter would soon be settled.

Matthias had already spoken of leaving, and undoubtedly would do so before many days.

Francis had undertaken a great task—so great that he did not convince Milly. He wanted revenge; she wanted to see the Hights ejected at once, and without ceremony.

However, she listened to her husband's promise of speedy deliverance, and, as usual, yielded to his expressed opinion of what was best.

Reluctantly abandoning her claim, she left the office and went home.

Dissatisfied as she was, she was far happier than Francis Holbrook. She left that wretched man more wretched than ever. Vencila's malicious audacity evidently had no limit, and there was no knowing what she would do next. It was simply impossible to order her out of the house, as Milly desired, for the threatened arrest for bigamy would follow.

Francis sat down, buried his face in his hands and meditated.

Three times that day acquaintances had remarked to him that he was not looking well. This was true. Francis had grown thin and haggard, and there were lines in his once sleek face which had been marked by something besides time.

The Hights had planned better than they suspected when the scheme of revenge was laid. Their victim's strong love for his wife made him far more helpless than his personal fears, while pity for her was a consuming fire that was always gnawing at his heart and mind.

"Better for her," he was now forced to mutter, impulsively, "if Lemuel Holly had lived!"

The thought brought up his crime of the past, and he remembered how mercilessly he had flung Lemuel to his doom, even while the unsuspecting man was gazing at Milly's beacon light.

The murder was not bringing the happiness for which Francis had hoped; he possessed Milly, but the possession bade fair to be her ruin.

What was to be done now?

How could Vencila's malignant devotion to evil be thwarted?

How could he get rid of her?

The door opened, and Matthias Haight appeared.

Francis grasped at the feeble hope.

"Mr. Haight," he said abruptly, when the elder man was seated, "do you remember the condition under which you came into my house?"

"To what do you refer?"

"I had your promise that my wife should not be annoyed in any way."

"Have I annoyed her?"

"No; but Vencila has. Your niece has not tried to curb her inclination to malicious mischief. She has gone on step by step until the climax was reached to-day. In my wife's absence Vencila received as a guest one Percy Sinclair, a gambler, a social outcast, a villain in every sense of the word. When my wife remonstrated your niece answered with the most

offensive, insulting language, defied Mrs. Holbrook, and said she should receive whomsoever she wished as a guest."

"Women will quarrel; it's born in them," calmly, philosophically returned Matthias.

"Surely, you don't uphold Vencila?"

"I never meddle with women's quarrels."

"And will you allow the outrage to go on?"

"If Vencila has offended, you can speak to her."

"Do you refuse to speak?"

"It is not my quarrel."

"But you promised that my wife should be well treated."

"My dear sir, a man of your age ought to know that two women can't live together. Ever since Mother Eve had her skirmish with the serpent in Eden, her sex, to put it plainly, have been possessed of the devil. Don't expect our women to keep the peace!"

"Sir, you insult womankind basely, and my wife in particular, but I will let that pass. Mr. Haight, the trouble at my house has grown too serious to be patched up, and there is only one way out of it. I will pay you well to take your niece and leave Jacob's Ladder."

"We have discussed that before."

"Name your price, and go."

"We are not ready."

"But I will give you ten thousand dollars."

"No."

"Fifteen."

Matthias shook his head.

"Twenty!"

"Mr. Holbrook," the lawyer coldly observed, "I told you when I first came here that I was not to be bribed. I say so now. Vencila and I are satisfied where we are, and you cannot offer money enough to tempt me. Don't attempt it. When we get ready to leave your house we will go."

"And is your niece to continue her persecutions?"

"It is in the order of events that women should quarrel. Let them have it out!"

Matthias spoke with cold, machine-like indifference, and as Francis looked at his hard face, he realized what a merciless will was opposed to him.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SHADOW-FORM OF DANGER.

A STRANGER called on business.

"You can go, Mr. Murdock," remarked Francis, looking out of the inner office, after a glance at the clock. "I will close the office."

"Very well, sir."

It was the usual hour for the paymaster to cease work, and after his reply—very respectfully made—he put on his street-coat. The coming of the stranger—whose visit was purely one of business—had interrupted the other interview in the private office, and Matthias Haight had gone out.

Murdock quickened his steps and overtook him.

"A fine day, Mr. Haight."

"Very."

"We have some leisure time before supper—suppose we walk a little beyond the town?"

"Very well," the lawyer answered.

Murdock turned the conversation to trivial matters, and talked in a ready, pleasant way peculiarly his own, but when he had talked thus for awhile, he carelessly asked:

"Have you invested in this town, sir?"

"No."

"Moneyed interests pay well here."

"No doubt."

"With Mr. Holbrook's advice you could place capital judiciously."

"Very likely."

"Possibly, you are only traveling in the West?"

"We are visiting Holbrook."

"A pleasant gentleman."

"Very."

"Do you remain long?"

"I am unable to say."

"There seems to be much good will between you and him."

"Yes."

"No doubt, you know his history well."

Murdock's manner was quiet and insinuating, and Matthias had met him with urbane dignity, but the latter now smiled slightly.

"What do you want to know?"

"Sir?"

"Why do you want Holbrook's history?"

"Indeed, I have never thought of his history. My association with him is purely a matter of the present. But I wished to imply that you have been his friend for a long time."

The paymaster made the explanation blandly, but he was, nevertheless, a thwarted man. He had set out to pump the lawyer, only to have his purpose suspected at the start.

Mr. Murdock was on good terms with the Hights. Being the most discerning person of the household, it had not taken him long to see that there was no love lost between Francis and his guests. Vencila's independent, free-and-easy, disrespectful manner was plain enough for any one to see, but Gideon looked deeper and perceived that Francis was seriously perturbed. The shrewd paymaster read every word, tone

and glance, and he read, too, the vague story told by the signs in Francis's face which others had interpreted as indications of ill health.

Gideon knew that his employer was in trouble, and that the Hights were at the bottom of it. He became interested, and tried to ascertain the nature of the trouble. Making himself agreeable to both uncle and niece he gained their good will, sought their society as much as possible, and tried to learn why they were at Holbrook's.

Thus far he had failed, and the effort to make Matthias talk was the second step in the game.

He scored another failure. Matthias was too shrewd to divulge his secrets willingly, and too shrewd to have them drawn from him by stratagem. He listened to Gideon with a smile of amusement, but, having taken a real fancy to the young man, and believing he might some time prove useful, the old lawyer did not manifest or feel anger.

Just as the paymaster was ready to give up, he chanced to see Vencila coming along the hillside. Forming a new plan quickly he excused himself to the uncle, walked away and intercepted the niece, the artifice being unsuspected by Matthias.

"What's your haste, Miss Haight?" he lightly asked, as he joined her.

"Oh! you dear boy, is it you?" she returned.

"It's nobody else."

"I'm so glad to see you!"

"I am honored."

"Don't mention it. Dear me! I am all wearied out. Shall we sit down?"

"I never miss the chance in such company."

"You dear boy!"

Vencila was a very effusive young woman, when in the society of a man young and handsome, and her terms of affection were worth about as much as the words of a woman of the world usually are.

"You look happy," continued Gideon. "I dare say you haven't the least cloud on your life."

"Haven't I! Why! I've had a fight to-day!" cried Vencila, ill-temper showing at once.

"You surprise me! With whom, pray?"

"That fool of a Milly. Did you know before that some women are born without brains?"

"But I thought you and she were great friends."

"Great grandmother! I hate her!"

"Then I suppose you will be leaving here soon?"

"Not much!"

Murdock was watching the woman critically. "If you have quarreled, Mrs. Holbrook may see fit to send you away."

"The old girl can't do it; I'll stay in spite of her. She has ordered me to quit already, but it wa'n't a go. I hate her, but I'll stay to worry her—stay in spite of her, or Tom-noddy Francis!"

"How can you do that, if Francis tells you to go?"

"He hadn't dare tell me that!"

"Why not?"

"I've got his nibs by the heel."

"I don't understand."

"Of course you don't, you dear boy."

Vencila had removed her hat, and she now swung it airily by the strings, in an excess of high spirits.

"I understand," returned Murdock; "you are joking."

"Am I? Not much; I mean all I say."

"I reckon if you were down on the Holbrooks you would not be staying with them."

"Gideon, you don't know half so much as you think you do. Did you never hear of revenge? If you had an enemy and knew you could worry him most of all by camping under his tent, wouldn't you do it? And wouldn't you refuse to go away, if you knew he dared not send you?"

Murdock felt himself near a secret of importance, and he set out to learn what it was. He had the advantage of possessing Vencila's good will, but, already, she was somewhat troubled by her reckless conduct in saying so much, and she wisely stopped where she was.

She did not actually refuse to tell anything, but evaded the point with the skill of an old campaigner.

Gideon did not learn the secret, but did ingratiate himself still deeper into Vencila's confidence. Adventuress that she was, she was as fond of conquest as a younger and less-hardened woman, and she thoroughly enjoyed the interview with the agreeable paymaster.

On his part he was both deep and cunning, and did not let the fact appear that her evasions annoyed him. He was so amiable, pleasant and gallant that she was effusive with her use of affectionate terms.

Twilight was at hand when they left the place and approached Holbrook's house.

Murdock at first hesitated to appear so boldly in Vencila's company now that war was declared, but he decided to go ahead. Matters were assuming a condition where there would be war, anyhow, and since he must be arrayed against the Holbrooks, it was well to be with the Hights.

Supper was waiting, and the whole party ate together. It was not a happy gathering.

Matthias was cold and composed; Milly was silent and indignant; Francis, gloomy and

equally silent; but Vencila was in high spirits and, talking constantly, forced Murdock to be her chief hearer, nominally.

The paymaster caught several glances from Milly which were not amiable, and he knew he was making himself the object of her fresh dislike. Never a favorite, he was losing what little part of her good will he had possessed.

He was more likely to be sent adrift than Vencila.

The latter's headlong course continued through the evening. She was sure that Milly had been to Holbrook with a complaint, and equally sure that it had failed. She had all of the vindictive venom of an evil-minded woman, and was determined to make Milly suffer to the utmost.

Murdock saw this, and could not help pitying the mistress of the house. During the time he had been there he had read Milly very accurately, and though he had never forgiven her for so soon forgetting Lemuel Holly, he was sorry to see her at Vencila's mercy.

His own just plan of vengeance demanded that she should suffer, however, and he would not let pity stand in its way.

Holbrook's mood did not change after supper, but he sat a gloomy listener to what occurred—except when his mind wandered. At times, it went back along the course of time to that night when Lemuel watched Milly's beacon-light, and, watching, died by an assassin's hands.

Francis had so long lived as an upright, wealthy, honored citizen that, before the Hights came, he had almost forgotten that he was a murderer.

He remembered it now, and could not help wondering if Lemuel was being avenged in his grave.

The party broke up early, and, as they did so, Vencila went to Francis's side.

"You old darling!" she whispered. "I am having lots of fun!"

The mine-owner did not answer, but a gleam crept into his dull eyes which was suggestive. Vencila hardly noticed it; she did not suspect that it was a voiceless warning. The crusade might yet be carried too far for her own safety.

CHAPTER XIII.

LAWLESS WORK IN THE HILLS.

MEN, women and children were collected at a point a mile distant from the town of Jacob's Ladder. That afternoon was an eventful one in the history of the place. Ever since Jacob's Ladder was founded its citizens had longed for a railroad to connect it with the outer world.

Step by step they had gone on toward the consummation of their hopes, and this day was to see the last spike driven. That the precise spot was not in the town, itself, was due to the fact that many difficulties had to be overcome, and where the last spike was to be driven there was scenery about as wild as could be found.

Gulches had to be filled up and rocks blasted away, and even when it was done, the surroundings were untamed and ragged.

As the people waited, Gideon Murdock approached Leonis Vane. The latter had kept with Milly previously, but some event had separated them, and the paymaster soon appeared at Miss Vane's side.

"An interesting occasion," he observed, pleasantly.

Leonis gave him an unfriendly glance.

"I'm glad you like it," she returned, shortly.

"I suppose Jacob's Ladder will now become a cosmopolitan place, though its name is ill-chosen."

"You had better have it changed."

"That should rest with the older residents."

"Why not with you? You are very officious with your servants."

Gideon looked at the speaker with grave surprise.

"To whom, pray?"

"Everybody."

"Are you not a trifle severe?"

"If my words don't please you, why not seek the company of your particular favorite, Miss Haight?"

"How do you know she is my favorite?"

"I have heard of your fancy for her."

"Then you have heard more than is true. Casual conversation indicates nothing. You must remember—"

"Oh! don't trouble me to remember; I am more than willing you should go to her."

"Excuse me, Miss Vane," Gideon replied, "but have I offended in any way?"

"Offended? You flatter yourself too much, sir. I should not aspire to your company anyway, and, now that you have shown your strong liking for Miss Haight, I advise you to keep with her. I admit that I cordially detest her—why, I don't intend to explain, so don't ask me. Of one thing rest assured, her friends can't be even my associates. But, it don't matter, anyway; you and I don't fancy each other, anyhow."

"Speak for yourself, pray."

"I have spoken plainly enough so that even a post could understand."

Leonis had been moved solely by her sympathy for Milly. If Gideon had been in disfavor

before, and he certainly had, he had gone down far lower during the last two days. Since the outbreak at Holbrook's, Vancila had persistently kept in his company, and the result had been in the natural course of events. Milly really began to hate him; she had complained to Leonis, and the latter judged him as Milly did.

Despite this, Leonis now began to repent having used language so severe. In her opinion Gideon deserved it all, but she felt that she was doing herself no honor.

She rightly thought that bitter and sarcastic talk was seldom called for, and never creditable to one of her sex.

"Mr. Murdock," she suddenly added, "you and I were never created to talk together. Nature and circumstances render it out of the question, and I shame myself every time we meet. I owe you thanks for saving me from the two ruffians who attacked me near the town, and I try to be grateful. Don't let me forget that. I do forget it though when we meet. Better that we should not meet at all. Suppose we agree to be strangers from this moment?"

"Is the proposition made in earnest?" Gideon calmly asked.

"Yes."

"So be it, then."

"We shall agree a good deal better."

"True."

"Perhaps your conscience will be clearer."

"Why?"

"You will be acting no double part."

He bowed gravely, but did not ask for an explanation.

"Very well; we are now strangers."

With this reply he walked quietly away, and was soon engaged in conversation with an old miner.

Leonis watched him with an amount of interest she had never before felt in a "stranger."

"He puzzles me! The man is intelligent, and intelligence covers a multitude of sins. Whether it can cover all of his I don't know; their name is Legion. If he would only keep away from the Hights I might be induced to think better of him—perhaps. But while he is the friend of Milly's enemies he is my enemy. I'll never speak to him again, and that will settle it!"

The time for driving the last spike had been set at five o'clock. As usual, the work to be done took more time than was expected, and night drew near before the other rails were fastened to the ties.

Speech-making began at twilight, and continued after dark.

The last spike was driven by the light of a lantern.

Great enthusiasm followed, and there were cheers galore.

In the mean while, Leonis and Milly, like a good many others, had walked aside. The younger people had grown weary and decided that the occasion was a bore. Around them lay gulches, rough ridges and mountains. It was a place full of wild beauty and novelty. Many explored it while daylight lasted, and remained after it was gone. Leonis and Milly sat down on a rock and enjoyed the place.

Conversation finally turned upon Milly's troubles, and they became so interested they did not notice that those who had been near them had gone back. They were not, however, without near neighbors.

Two men had for some time had them under watch, and when the others wandered away, the men drew near. Leonis and Milly did not see them.

Serpent-like the strangers edged forward, now crawling, then creeping, then sliding along through some open space. They made an evil-looking pair. They were rough and ragged, and good specimens of the typical toughs of the mining-camp.

The young women remained unconscious of danger until the skulkers suddenly springing upon their prey, each seized a victim. After that their course was entirely different, except that each prevented an outcry by holding a rough hand over his captive's mouth.

Leonis was lifted and borne away as fast as her captor could go, but Milly was held just where she was seized.

She struggled, but in vain.

The second man was watching the progress of the first, and, at last, he swung Milly around and dashed her to the ground with force which partially stunned her.

Then he ran swiftly after his companion.

Leonis did not endure her captivity quietly. She struggled to the best of her ability, but found her efforts wholly fruitless. Her captor evinced his unusual strength by carrying her without great trouble, and that same strength wholly overcame her own endeavors.

When the second man came up he gave his help, and she was thus borne some distance from the scene of capture.

At last they paused in a place of marked wildness. Rocks, bushes, occasional trees and cliffs were mixed in profusion and confusion, the latter being of striking formation. They rose boldly in the air, here and there, until it seemed like the ruins of a vast building whose walls, though broken, were yet massive in places.

"Hyar we rest," pronounced one of the men,

as he set Leonis upon her feet. "You kin screech ef yer want ter."

Leonis did not cry out, but she looked at the men with admirable courage.

"What do you mean by this indignity?" she demanded.

"We mean that we hev gobbled you up."

"You will be sorry for it."

"So fur, we are glad—tickled ter death!"

"I demand to be allowed to go to my friends."

"We're yer friends!"

"Friends! You are mere ruffians!"

"Even abuse sounds nice from *your* pooty lips."

"I have seen you before."

"Whar?"

"You attacked me once before."

"We did, you leetle darlin', an' the meddlin' critter named Murdock knocked us out. He won't show up this time, or, ef he does, he will git everlastingly laid out, hisself. You'll observe we hev weepens, an' we know how ter use 'em. Hey, Cale?"

"Right," returned his companion. "W'ot we don't know erbout sech things ain't no account. I'm a wild buff'ler who kin make the bull's-eye beller ev'ry time! I'm a jumpin' coyote who kin scratch the turf seventy-nine foot at ev'ry leap! I'm a modern Samson who kin tear up big trees by the roots an' sling 'em about fer footballs. Fer pertic'lers see small bills. Wah! wah!"

"I'm same, too," chimed in the previous speaker. "I'm Perk Honey, the roarin' elefant from Rhinoceros! I'm a cannon-ball with a war-map o' Egypt in my vest-pocket! When I howl the wolves all fall dead, an' the mountains rise on tip toe and thump their noses ag'in' each other until their ribs crack an' lightnin' jumps out o' their bosoms! Wah! wah!"

The evil pair swung their arms and danced in unison, and their absurdities did not hide the danger within them.

Their purpose was to frighten Leonis, and they succeeded fully.

Her face grew pale.

"Gentlemen," she exclaimed, "I beg that you will let me return to my friends."

"Let yer go!" echoed Perk Honey. "Not much! We want yer society. We're dear-hunters—d, e, a, r, mind ye—an' we'll hold fast ter the dear we've ketched!"

CHAPTER XIV.

AT THE OUTLAWS' CAMP-FIRE.

LEONIS could hardly command her voice to answer, but she finally broke the silence:

"Return me to my friends and you shall be well paid for it."

"We ain't lookin' fer money," Perk Honey replied.

"Yet, you would not despise it."

"Money is good."

"You shall have it if you let me go."

"Money is good, but you're a heap better. We want *you*; we've got yer, an' money can't buy us off."

"Do you know the danger you are daring?"

"What is it?"

"You will be captured and punished."

"No, we won't, my little darlin'; nobody is smart enough ter ketch us in these mountains. We know ev'ry nook an' corner, an' we kin laugh at the 'hull of Wyoming. Now, don't try to skeer us with no goblin-yarus, for it can't be did."

"Skeer us?" Cale chimed in. "Skeer the wild war-horses of the Rocky tip-tops? Why, we ketch lightnin' on our fingers, an' snuff out blizzards jest by sneezin' at 'em. Skeer us? Why, we swaller seven grizzlies fer breakfast every mornin', an' sleep with rattlesnakes fer a piller. Wah! wah!"

"Wah! wah!" echoed Perk Honey.

Leonis sunk down upon a rock. Every minute brought new evidence of the dangerous natures of the men, and this was not the only proof. Since her first encounter with them she had learned that they were idle vagabonds who were never known to work, and were suspected of a good deal more, and much more, than was known of them.

Perk Honey took a generous chew of tobacco, and amended his somewhat boisterous manner somewhat.

"Fack is, Rosy Cheeks, me'n my pard has fell dead in love with yer. We are prone ter admire female beauty, as our trade as dear-hunters shows, an' when we sot eyes on you our hearts was rent all up. We'lowed we must hev yer, and we've got yer."

"And now?"

"Now, you're ours."

"Of what use am I to you?"

"You kin cook for our stomachs, an' your pooty face will be both food an' drink. I dare say we'll manage ter make yer useful, an' we wouldn't part with yer fer all the gold in this yer territory."

Leonis did not answer. She would willingly have promised any amount of money for her release, but their previous refusals had been made in a way which told how foolish such talk would be.

She dared not call for help, and as every

minute's reprieve was of value, she sat in silence and watched and listened.

Was there any hope of rescue?

The abductors had gone only a short distance from where she was seized, but there must be a reason for that. With such a large number of men near they would not act in a reckless way, and it was clear that some peculiarity in the lay of the land made them especially safe.

Cale Shaw lighted his pipe, and he and Honey proceeded to lie down and enjoy themselves.

Manifestly anxious to worry the prisoner still further, they told stories of their past life, real or fictitious, in which crime and violence bore the chief part, but Leonis could not very well get any worse opinion of them.

Escape was out of the question. The cliffs made a sort of *cul-de-sac*, and at the outlet were the outlaws. She watched the dark rocks and trees, and prayed that rescuers might appear, but none came.

Somewhat to her surprise she never heard a sound outside the camp which would indicate that any one else was astir. Where were her friends? Milly had been left behind. Surely, she would give the alarm and search would be made, but—where were the searchers?

Her captors became quiet. She would have thought them asleep had not the odor of tobacco-smoke still reached her. As for herself, sleep was out of the question.

Time passed. To her it seemed as if the night must be about gone, and, really, three hours had elapsed since the isolated spot was reached.

Perkins Honey rose, yawned, and shook himself.

"I want ter go ter sleep," he announced.

"We'll tie up the gal an' take a bit of a snooze." Leonis made no comments. She felt that remonstrances would be useless while there was danger that any resistance might anger them, and make her situation worse. They bound her wrists together, and then passed a cord around her waist and secured the loose end to a tree.

"This will keep yer nice an' safe," Honey remarked, "but won't interfere with yer comfort. You kin lay down, set up, or dance a pigeon-wing, but yer can't go off on a promenade that might get yer into some pison fix."

"Twouldn't do yer no good ef yer did," added Cale. "I s'pose you wonder why we hev stopped so nigh yer friends. Wal, you see, this region is cut off from all other parts o' the hills by a series of canyons that makes it sort of an island. We crossed on a foot-bridge, but pulled it in arter us, an' nobody kin now cross. We are as much cut off as ef we was in another world."

"And you expect to triumph?" Leonis questioned.

"Sartain!"

"You will fail!"

"How do you know?"

"Wait and see."

"Anything ter oblige ye."

The ruffian grinned humorously. He had not exaggerated in saying that they felt perfectly safe, and thought they could afford to laugh at pursuit.

Both men lay down, and at once relapsed into stillness. Leonis was not sleepy. She sat in gloomy silence, and her situation was not relieved by the surroundings. The black rocks were gloomy in the extreme, and one less stout-hearted would have given way to despair entirely.

There was another lapse of time. The captors were breathing heavily, and seemed to be asleep. The girl's helpless condition was aggravating. The bold confidence of the men was a mockery of her own weakness. At times she was tempted to cry out for help, but the time to do it successfully seemed past, and might result in disaster.

Hark!

Leonis heard a slight sound among the rocks. It was like that an animal might make in moving, and her color changed.

There were grizzly bears in the hills.

Was one near at hand?

She fixed her gaze upon the suspected point and listened breathlessly. The outlaws lay between her and the unseen creature. If it was a bear, she thought they would first receive attention, though that might not benefit her.

She watched the rocks narrowly, and was soon rewarded. Something moaned—rose higher—was revealed in a place before vacant, as a dark object of considerable size. Was it the dreaded grizzly?

It moved forward, its course toward the sleepers. The last doubt appeared to be gone; the darkness baffled her gaze, but the object was too large for any animal she could think of except a bear.

Its progress toward the camp was slow and stealthy, and the crisis was at hand. She would not call out to warn the sleepers—they had shown no mercy; they should receive none. But they were not to be taken wholly by surprise. The prowler had made no sound of late, but something aroused Perkins Honey; he sprung to his feet with a kind of convulsive movement.

He did not long remain upright—the prowler leaped upon him, and both went down together.

Leonis drew a quick, eager breath.

At last she had recognized the intruder as a man, and hope flashed up from the ashes of the night's experience.

Although surprised, Perk did not prove an easy victim. He fought stoutly, and the sounds of strife arousing Cale Shaw, he soon had an ally. The two engaged the unknown, while Leonis, looking in vain for reinforcements, could only pray that victory might not be with the evil pair. She had the courage to aid the unknown, but her bonds kept her where she was.

The struggle was fierce and rapid—so rapid that she could not follow the movements of the contestants, while the darkness kept her from distinguishing one from another. Blows were given and received, and the wild scene almost overcome her.

At last it was over, and one of the trio arose and approached her. Who was it? Who was the survivor? He came close, and the darkness did not appear to trouble him.

"I hope you are not frightened, Miss Vane."

That voice! The utterance was calm and deliberate, but not that of either Honey or Shaw. She was too much surprised to make reply—the speaker was Gideon Murdock!

"Are you bound?" he added.

She could barely murmur an affirmative reply.

"Perhaps it would be as well to release you."

He used his knife deftly, and she was soon at liberty.

"It was hardly polite to tie you up thus."

"Oh! Mr. Murdock, I am very grateful—"

"Pray don't mention it."

"Mention it! How can I help it? I was in the hands of those ruffians, and Heaven only knows what would have been the result. You came to my aid, and I am saved. May you always find as heroic a friend in your hours of adversity!"

"Oh! I rather enjoyed my skirmish with those fellows. There's nothing like a bit of excitement to stir up one's blood and keep it from stagnating. I'll see if they are recovering, and transfer these cords to their own wrists."

He proceeded to carry out this plan, his manner still being as cool and business-like as usual. He had spoken to Leonis as quietly as if the occasion was of the most ordinary kind, and kept up his reputation of a human iceberg.

Leonis was not interested in the tying operation. Diemay and mortification assailed her. For the second time she had been saved by Gideon Murdock, and, this time, the rescue was from danger so great that the service could not be disregarded.

"And I have persistently abused him!" she thought. "I never had good cause for it, but I listened to my own terrible temper and disgraced myself. I will humble myself, now; I will apologize meekly!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE PAPER FOUND IN THE BOTTLE.

THE paymaster returned to Leonis.

"Mr. Murdock," she began, firmly, "I owe you an apology—"

"Not at all," Gideon answered, quietly.

"You are wrong; I do owe you one. I feel that I have never used you right, and I want to admit it now. You will see that my conscience has been quickened by purely selfish causes. This I freely admit; I claim no honor. On the contrary, I am all wrong, and I admit it."

"Miss Vane, you are only in error," Murdock asserted, with machine-like politeness. "Danger has excited you, and made you see what does not exist. Let us drop the subject, if you please."

"No! I am going to do justice to you and myself. You have always acted like a gentleman, yet I have seen fit to feel groundless prejudice and make myself ridiculous. Adversity and your own noble conduct have made me see clearly. I want to apologize to you; I do apologize."

"There is nothing to apologize for, Miss Vane. You are nervous and excited—"

"I am quite calm!"

"But the peril of the night has led you into error—"

"My error was of the past."

"I must respectfully insist that you have always used me well, and owe no apology."

"Didn't I misuse you only to-night?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"I told you we must henceforth be strangers."

"That was said jokingly."

"I confess with shame that I meant it all."

"I think not. The fact is, you are now excited and nervous—"

"Don't say that again!"

Leonis spoke imperiously, sharply, and then added:

"You are a living mystery to me. You are full of contradictions, and often feign a want of perception you certainly don't feel. Why is it? Are you purposely making yourself a riddle to me?"

"By no means."

"Yet, you are acting a part, be the purpose what it may. You pretend not to see things

which you must see, for you are a man of intelligence."

"We all have our peculiarities, and it may be I have more than my share," Murdock evenly replied. "Men and women make great mistakes when they try to estimate others by their own rules of conduct. Somebody has defined the word 'crank' as 'one who don't think as we do.' That's about it. We hang to our opinions and our ways; they are all right, and others' views and ways are wrong. But this is foreign to the subject. I hope you have not been roughly used by yonder ruffians?"

Leonis abandoned the effort to make the paymaster act like other men. He was always indifferent and, in fact or by pretense, dull of comprehension whether she reproved or commended him. She determined to struggle no longer, but try to show that she was really grateful.

"I have suffered even less than was to be expected; but your question reminds me that this is not a safe place. Where are my friends?"

"The search has been abandoned for to-night, and nearly all have gone back to Jacob's Ladder. Your father, with a small party, has encamped in the hills, but I don't know where. I hunted alone."

"How did you find me?"

"By a curious chance—the odor of tobacco-smoke."

"The men were smoking."

"Even then it was a hard matter to get here. I knew this place, cut off from the rest of the mountain as it was by a series of canyons that hemmed it in. At one point, only, could it be crossed, and that was by a foot-bridge. I knew this and sought the place, but the bridge was gone, and it was only after hard work that I managed to improvise a way of getting over. Then I easily found you."

"Can we get home now?"

"Yes, though it will be a long walk. It is two miles, and over half of the way is rough in the extreme."

"Let us go at once."

They started. Nothing could be done with Perk and Cale, so they were left where they were. Gideon philosophically remarked that some stray grizzly might attend to their case before morning, and thus save the hangman a job.

Some difficulty was experienced in getting over the paymaster's substitute for a bridge, but, after that, the way, though exceedingly rough, was not of a nature to baffle Gideon.

Leonis had often been in the hills before, but it was by day, and she had never before realized how hard it was to get around. While the darkness was not intense it was such as to render it hard to get foothold and keep out of chasms. She did not refuse aid, and, more than once, Gideon's arm was around her as he helped her over some particularly dangerous place.

By mutual consent a direct course had been chosen, as it was much shorter than to go back to the railroad and follow it in all its windings, but the adopted plan proved to be a mistake; they became hopelessly tangled up in a region the wildness of which eclipsed all that had gone before, and progress was so slow that they finally stopped in despair.

"Day is beginning to break, anyhow," Murdock announced.

They sat down and awaited its full coming. The paymaster remained what he had been all through the journey—a kind, thoughtful protector, but he never lost his peculiar way; it was by act, rather than word, that he made himself of value.

At times Leonis wondered if it was all a wild dream, and half expected to waken and find that she had not been away from Jacob's Ladder at all.

The paymaster finally arose and calmly said: "We'll go on, now."

They went, and, though progress was slow, no longer had the difficulty of the earlier part of the journey. They were near Jacob's Ladder, and steadily cut down the intervening distance. In this way they reached a rapid stream which Murdock rightly suspected to be Babel Run, the water of which prevented them from crossing.

"A narrow or shallow place must be near," the paymaster remarked. "Remain here and I will search for it."

Leonis did not object. She drew a weary sigh and sunk down upon a rock, while Gideon walked further down-stream. The stream received careful attention, but he did not find the desired place. Alone he could have crossed easily; with the girl, it would be hard in the extreme, for the water was rapid and, as a rule, deep.

He was passing a pool when something peculiar arrested his attention. Some small, dark object was floating around in a circle on the water, and he was at a loss to see what it was at first. Curiosity led him to draw it ashore with a stick.

His trouble seemed taken in vain when he discovered that it was only a bottle, but, as it came wholly clear of the foam, something white showed very distinctly within.

"Paper, upon my word! Is it a joke, or something more important?"

He broke the bottle on a rock, and spread out the paper. Lines of writing were on it, kept

distinct by the tight-fitting cork. He began to read, and a sudden start soon proved that he found the contents interesting to a degree not to be expected. He read rapidly, never raising his gaze until the last line had been reached.

The writing was as follows:

"I, James Sunderland, better known as Shaggy Jim, being of sound mind, do for various reasons make on this paper a statement of facts I have long kept secret rather than have disagreeable notoriety."

"May 28th, of last year, I was one night among the rocks to the west of the town of Jacob's Ladder. I had been in to buy ammunition. Leaving the town I went as I have said, and sat down to be alone with Nature."

"While there two men came down the mountain-side. I recognized them both by sight and by their voices—they were Lemuel Holly and Francis Holbrook, owners of the Bald Eagle Mine."

"They paused near me and began to talk. Holly's words were those of a child, or, perhaps I should say, of the simple-minded man he was; but I soon detected a peculiar ring in Holbrook's voice."

"The latter called his partner's attention to the light shining from Holly's house, and spoke of Holly's wife. He bade Holly look only at that light, and the direction was obeyed."

"While Holly was thus occupied Holbrook suddenly gave him a violent push, and Holly fell over the edge of the cliff."

"I had seen murder done, for no man could survive that fall."

"Holbrook seemed to be seized with an assassin's fear, and he ran about looking for possible witnesses of his crime. Easily avoided discovery, and he finally quieted down and left the place."

"I am one who meddles but little in the affairs of the world, but I determined to do what I thought was my duty in this case. I went east along the course of Babel Run until the rocks enabled me to descend, and then, after great labor and trouble, made my way through the darkness to where the victim of the murderous assault had fallen."

"Lemuel Holly, of course, was dead; no one could survive that fall."

"When I found that I could do no good to him, I considered what I should do for his memory's sake. According to the way of the world, I ought to go to the town and tell that murder had been done, but I was not a man of the world. I decided to say nothing."

"The dead man was buried as the victim of an accident, and I am told that Francis Holbrook pretended to be deeply grieved. He certainly did a very kind act—to himself—by marrying the widow."

"I have never told this secret to any one, and nobody but me has ever suspected that Holly was foully murdered, but such was the case. I am now writing out the facts, for I feel disease getting a hold on me which I think will result in my death. Before I die the world shall know the truth."

"To all of which I hereby set my name, asserting that I have told the truth."

"JAMES SUNDERLAND."

To the end of the paper Gideon Murdock read with rapt attention, and then a look of triumph flashed over his face.

"At last!" he exclaimed. "My long campaign seems drawing to an end, my suspicions are proven true, and justice shall be satisfied. But, where is the writer of this document?"

He had heard of Sunderland, though he did not know him by that name. "Shaggy Jim" was no unknown figure at Jacob's Ladder. At intervals a bony old man had been in the habit of coming to the town to purchase supplies. No one knew anything about him, but it was said that he was a hermit who lived in the hills.

Mental derangement, weakness of mind and marked eccentricity were alike attributed to him, but those who had talked with him had found him shrewd and logical. It was they who thought him eccentric only.

"I must find him," Gideon decided, "but where am I to look?"

It was not an easy question to answer. The bottle had been found in Babel Run, and might have floated two miles before reaching the place where Murdock stood.

This fact led the paymaster to wonder why the revelation had been thus sent out into the world. He had heard of sailors committing papers to the ocean waves, but why should it be done in this case?

"Never mind," he decided. "I shall find 'Shaggy Jim' sooner or later, and then let Holbrook beware. The hour of my vengeance draws near!"

CHAPTER XVI.

WHERE IS SHAGGY JIM?

GIDEON put the paper carefully away in his pocket, and then renewed the search for a place where Leonis could cross the stream. In this effort he was successful, and he returned to the girl with the information. They were soon on the northern side of the Run.

After that all was easy, and they went on toward the town.

Leonis found her mind full of mixed emotions, chief among which was gratitude to Murdock. Unimpressive as he had been, no one could have cared for her more carefully during the night. He had not been gallant, tender, or even friendly; but his strong arm had been at her service whenever needed, and she did not underestimate the service done.

She was very grateful—and all the more so because she remembered the many rebuffs and unkind words she had given him previously. Had he ever deserved them? She thought not. True, he had been very friendly with the

Haight, but, surely, he had a right to choose what associates he wished.

Yes, Leonis was inclined to forgive everything, but—her opinion had already changed once; it might change again.

Jacob's Ladder was reached, and just in time to prevent all of the male citizens from turning out to search for the lost girl. Many were already in the hills, where they remained when the search was abandoned the night before. Messengers were sent to recall them.

Leonis was a general favorite, and there were corresponding congratulations over her return.

Gideon Murdock would have been lionized in a measure, but he seized the first opportunity to slip away quietly. He wanted nobody's praises or compliments.

As soon as he could do so conveniently, he made his way to the largest store in the town, and, after a roundabout preface, approached the subject nearest his thoughts.

"By the way, did you use to sell to the man known as Shaggy Jim?"

"Yes."

"I've seen him in the place. Who and what is he?"

"A man who's soured on the world. Some say he is out of his head, but he's as sane as you or I."

"Have you seen him lately?"

"No. I don't know but he's dead."

"Why do you think so?"

"The old fellow was looking bad when he was here, and when I asked if he was sick, he said he was. Since then he hasn't been around, though his regular visit for supplies was due three weeks ago. Shouldn't wonder if he had turned up his toes!"

This opinion rather startled Gideon.

"Where does the old man live?" he asked, anxiously.

"Somewhere in the hills."

"Don't you know where?"

"No; and I reckon nobody out Shaggy Jim does. He made no friends and confided in no one. Once, I asked him if he had a good shanty to live in. He said he hadn't any sort of shanty. 'Cave, then,' I suggested; and he answered in the single word, 'Mebbe!' From that I reckon he did live in a cave, but where it was I don't know."

"You say he made friends with nobody?"

"Yes—wouldn't even talk with the general run of people, but business made me know him better than any one else, here."

"Where did he come from to this vicinity?"

"I don't know. He was Shaggy Jim, hermit, and that is all I know about him."

"If he shows up again, will you send me word?"

"Yes; but, as I said before, I'm more than half of the opinion that the old fellow is dead. Once let him get sick in the mountains, alone and without medicine, and he would go over the dark river at a gallop."

Murdock left without securing further information, and in a disappointed frame of mind. He had hoped to find Shaggy Jim without trouble, and he was as far from it as ever.

The storekeeper's opinion that the hermit had died was unpleasantly confirmed by one sentence in Shaggy Jim's own letter, found in the bottle. The writer had stated that he "felt disease getting a hold" on him which, he thought, would result in his death.

Had the prediction been fulfilled?

There was nothing in the letter to explain the singular step of placing it in the bottle and confiding it to Babel Run, and as the writer must have known there was not over one chance in a hundred of its being found, even if it escaped destruction on the rocks of the stream, Gideon could not but see that it looked possible that the old hermit, finding death near at hand, had sent out the message as the one possible way of getting to the eyes of the public.

If he was dead, his secret might be said to have died with him. The written paper would be no evidence. While at the store Murdock had asked if the merchant had ever seen Shaggy Jim's writing. The reply had been that he had not.

As no one could identify the letter as Jim's work it was no evidence in law.

Only the hermit could tell his story.

In view of the fact that the railroad was opened, preparations had been made to set the day apart as a holiday, and, now Leonis was recovered, the plan was carried out.

Gideon Murdock took no part.

As soon as he was sure he was freed from work he left the town and went to Babel Run. Beginning where the bottle was found he set out to explore the region of the stream between that point and where Lemuel Holly had died.

If all his theories were correct, Shaggy Jim's cave, or shanty, must be near.

All day the already-weary paymaster persevered. He searched carefully and laboriously, and, he believed, left no niche unexplored, but found no evidence of present or past human residence along the Run. The mystery of the bottled message was increased. If the hermit had dropped it into the stream as the last resort of one who had a valuable secret to reveal, why

did he not go to Jacob's Ladder, if he was able to get to the Run from a distance?

"I believe his abiding-place was near here," Gideon decided, after reviewing all the evidence carefully, "but what sort of a place can it have been, that it defies my search so persistently?"

Speculation availed nothing, but the letter remained as tangible proof of the crime, looked at from his point of view.

He sat down and studied it, but the lack of details was vexatious. He had always believed that Holbrook pushed Holly over the cliff, and had formulated theories as to the cause, but the manuscript told nothing.

"And it is no proof in law," he admitted.

"It satisfies me of the mine-owner's guilt, but no judge or jury would accept it. Possibly, in case of a crisis, I might frighten Holbrook with it."

He put the paper in his pocket, again, and went back to Jacob's Ladder. The town was beginning to tire of celebration, and some of the people would have given him honor for saving Leonis, but he evaded them all and took no part in the day's glories.

He did learn that a party sent to secure Perk Honey and Cale Shaw had failed to find them; they had freed themselves from bonds and made good their escape.

Gideon went back to Holbrook's. When he entered the parlor no one else was there, and he was about to sit down when Vencila entered. She greeted him in her effusive way, and both took chairs near the window.

Although amiable to him, that was not the general condition of her mind. She felt irritable, and proceeded to give her opinion of the day in uncomplimentary and sarcastic words.

The truth was, Vencila was jealous. In order to worry Milly she had taken possession of Gideon whenever opportunity offered, and, as a result, had come to admire him greatly. Leonis had always been a thorn in her flesh, and the recent adventure angered her.

What right had Leonis to be saved by Gideon?

The fair adventuress longed to vent her spite on Miss Vane. She suspected that it had been all a prearranged plan on Leonis's part, and longed to accuse her of throwing herself at Murdock's face.

To the paymaster, however, she was as amiable as ever, and that was saying a good deal.

Milly entered the room. Ignoring the couple by the window, she went to the table. She made a brief search, and then turned to Vencila.

"Miss Haight, have you seen my bracelet?" she asked.

"No," was the curt reply.

"I left it on the table."

"What's that to me?"

The question, insolently asked, aroused Milly's anger at once.

"It may be a good deal to you!" she retorted.

"Why?"

"Inanimate objects don't move without help. The bracelet has gone, and nobody has been in here but you."

It was a pointed accusation, and one Milly would not have made had she not been stung by Vencila's own intemperate language.

Gideon let his mask drop for a moment, and, believing that Vencila was really innocent, hastened to declare:

"I can certify that Miss Haight has not been near the table, Mrs. Holbrook."

"Who asked you to speak, sir?" Milly demanded.

"No one. I merely spoke in the interests of justice."

"Your interference is not wanted."

"Suppose my evidence had been on your side, would you then have resented it?"

"I say your interference is not wanted. Remember that you are a hired man!"

Milly spoke intemperately, and not without some misgivings, but she was not sorry for a chance to quarrel with Murdock. She had never liked him, and, since the Haight's came, and he had acted as their satellite and friend, she had grown to hate him.

"Our ladyship is as amiable as ever," observed Vencila, contemptuously. "I am a thief, and whoever is able to deny the fact is a vagabond and ruffian. Strange what airs we do put on!"

"Words amount to nothing, and clear no one," answered Milly. "I make no charges, but the bracelet has not moved away of its own accord. I should like to know what has become of it."

"Find it, then."

With this terse advice, which she well knew would be more irritating than to give more attention to the hostess, Vencila turned her back and addressed Gideon:

"The celebration has been a great success, and I am more than ever in love with Jacob's Ladder. During the winter, with Mr. Holbrook's permission, I shall give a party here, once a week. Of course, dear boy, you will attend."

Milly turned away. Her anger was too great to be expressed in words, anyhow, and she was incapable of choosing even commonplace words well then. Vencila's audacious claim that she was going to remain and do as she pleased, com-

ing at that moment, was too much for human composure.

Vencila laughed as Milly went out.

"That cat is down again!"

"Are you busy?" Gideon asked, abruptly.

"No."

"Suppose we go to walk?"

"Come on, dear boy."

Vencila rose promptly, and Murdock followed her example. They left the house, and started toward the northern hills. The paymaster went, resolved to get light on certain obscure points.

CHAPTER XVII.

GIDEON IS ORDERED TO GO.

VENCILA's hand was on Murdock's arm. The touch gave him a disagreeable sensation, for he had learned enough of her to realize, in part, how evil she was. If force of circumstances led him to act an objectionable part at Jacob's Ladder his instincts of honor had suffered no deterioration, and he knew he was not honored by such company.

He was unswerving in his purpose, however, and gave no hint of the state of his mind.

The young woman talked volubly, and he allowed her to dwell upon trivial matters until they were beyond the dwellings of the town.

Then he stopped short.

"Milly loves you no longer," he remarked.

"Dear boy, she never did."

"Don't you expect to be driven away?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"She can't do it."

"You have made that assertion before. Now, let me ask why it is so? What hold have you upon her?"

"You dear fellow! I'd tell you if I could, but I can't. I'm a woman; so is Milly. I must protect her."

"Even after she has accused you of being a thief?"

"Do you suppose she really meant that?" demanded Vencila, sharply.

"Certainly, she did."

"Well, she wants to be mighty careful, or she will get fired out of that house, and see another woman in her place."

"Who?"

"Myself."

"You are jesting."

"Not much. You don't know so much about this case as you think you do."

"But, of course, you can't get Milly out."

"I can."

"How?"

"Because I am Francis Holbrook's wife!"

Murdock's persistence had met its reward at last; he knew the secret of the hold which the Haight's had upon the owner of the Bald Eagle. He did not doubt the assertion for a moment. Long before it had been clear to him that Francis lived in great fear of them, and Vencila's claim easily explained why so bold a man had cowed before them. Murdock saw clearly, and his own courage increased. Nevertheless, he did not lose his cunning.

"You, his wife! How could he marry you while Milly held that position?"

"How stupid you are! I knew the old codger long before Milly ever dreamed of his existence; more than that, we were married when she was in short dresses. It was not a happy union. Frankie and I were not of amiable or congenial natures, and we parted. He was rash enough to marry again, while my life has been irreproachable."

The speaker laughed lightly as she made the last assertion, as if she saw some good joke in the statement.

"I cannot imagine why you came to Holbrook's house, and consented to live in peace with him," pursued Murdock, patiently seeking for information.

"Having told so much, I may as well give the whole story. I came for revenge!"

"Indeed!"

"To say that I hate Holbrook would be putting it mildly; I should have crushed him long ago if I'd known where he was, but I did not. If he had remained a poverty-stricken wretched creature and pined I might never have found him again. The Bald Eagle Mine brought all his trouble upon him. When that began to pan out rich his fame spread; I heard of him; I came here, and here I am."

"It's a wonder he has not bought you off."

"He will, as soon as I've tortured him enough. He's tried it already, but I've refused all offers. I hate him and seek revenge, and I am going to have it by making him and his wife writhe and squirm as long as I wish. Do you see Francis is losing flesh and growing haggard? My revenge is working!"

"Why do you hate him so?"

"Oh! we were not congenial."

"Did he ever do any particular great wrong to you?"

"Yes, he never consulted my pleasure after we were married, and we fought like cats and dogs."

"And you are here simply to worry him?"

"Yes. Of course I have him under my thumb. The blessed dunces dares not bounce me; he wants to keep his secret from wife number two, and so

he crouches like a whipped dog. When I have worried them all I wish I'll take twenty-five thousand from Francis and go away, but not without letting that odious Milly know the truth. Frank will make me promise to keep the secret, but I'll tell it to precious Milly as soon as I get the dollars of our daddies!"

Vencila paused for breath, and then added:

"I've been very frank, dear boy, but I know you won't give me away."

"Of course not."

"There's lots of fun ahead."

"For Francis?"

"For me; Frank isn't in it. Of course old Uncle Matthias would howl like a hungry wolf if he knew I had turned sieve and let out the game—ware Mat, and stick to me, old boy!"

Vencila was as airy and confident as ever, and it was not hard to put at rest any lingering doubts she might have, but she confessed that she should not have confided in him had not Milly's late accusation roused her to anger.

When satisfied that he had heard the whole story, Gideon escorted her back to the house. He was soon alone in his own room.

He had heard much that was of interest, and did not under-estimate its importance, but his first thoughts were of a nature entirely different. He was beset with grave doubts, and with dissatisfaction.

He had come to Jacob's Ladder with the best of motives, and had never wavered in the belief that there had been foul play in more ways than one, in the days past. To accuse Francis Holbrook without evidence would have been madness, so he entered upon the only course open to him—a still-hunt for proof.

This course, even with the best of motives, had been obnoxious and full of dissatisfaction from the first. He had never been a hypocrite, nor found it necessary to pursue a course of deceit. Thoroughly honorable, himself, he had loathed his part at the mining-town, but a sense of duty had led him on.

If possible, Lemuel Holly must be avenged.

He had made friends with the Hights as a part of his plan, but had always disliked them. Now, he loathed Vencila. She made no further accusation against Francis than that they, years before, had not been able to live together in peace, yet she was relentless in persecuting him now.

"She is as bad as he," Gideon decided, "and it is a disgrace to associate with her, but it must be done. The Hights, ignoble as they are, may be useful to me, anon; I must keep in their good graces. Ugh! I had as soon make free with a snake!"

He shivered, and was thoroughly dissatisfied. He thought of Leonis Vane, and made a quick, impatient gesture.

There lay the keenest pang of all.

"I have Vencila's secret," he resumed, "but I don't see that it can help me. It is a matter between her and Holbrook, and they must fight it out. All I want is to find Shaggy Jim and prove that murder was done when poor Holly went over the cliff into Babel Run."

Beset by the conflicting emotions of his complicated position, Gideon found much to think about, and it was late when he retired.

The matter of the bracelet had almost passed from his mind, but it was recalled to memory forcibly at the breakfast-table the next morning. When the family met, both Francis and Milly were ominously silent and grim-visaged, but this only spurred Vencila on to fresh activity.

She made Murdock the recipient of her remarks, and, in her way, sparkled with original expressions, many of which were covert shots at the Holbrooks. Murdock, however, did not like the situation, so he answered briefly, coldly, and, at times, ungraciously.

He went to the office first, but was soon joined by Francis. The latter silently entered the inner room, but called Gideon after a few moments.

The latter entered and a written paper was handed to him.

"Read!" the mine-owner shortly directed.

Gideon obeyed. The writing was in Francis's hand, and was as follows:

"The bearer, Gideon Murdock, has been in my service for several months as paymaster and general secretary. I have found him unusually capable, as well as willing and honest."

"FRANCIS S. HOLBROOK."

The paymaster looked up in surprise.

"What does this mean?" he inquired.

"Simply that I am about to dispense with your services," Holbrook curtly explained.

"To discharge me?"

"Yes."

"Have I failed to do my work properly?"

"No."

"What, then, is the cause of this?"

"You have not failed as a worker, but as a gentleman. That is all I need to say."

"Excuse me; it is not all. You could maintain your assertion if you complained of my work, for I could not well demand an explanation; but you place the complaint on other grounds. You say I have failed in the part of a gentleman. Since you have said this, I must ask

that you prove the fact or admit its falsity, which latter fact, I claim is true."

"When you saw fit to become the fast friend of Vencila Haight," answered Francis, angrily, "and put slights and insults upon my wife, you made your retention by me out of the question."

"How have I insulted Mrs. Holbrook?"

"Not by word, I admit, but by showing your sympathy for Vencila Haight, and encouraging her in her attacks upon my wife."

"I suppose the episode of the bracelet is responsible for this?"

"That was the last stroke."

"What part did I take against Mrs. Holbrook?"

"You proclaimed the Haight woman's innocence."

"I merely said she had not approached the table from which the bracelet is alleged to have been taken."

"Oh! we do not instance any particular word of yours," Francis admitted, irritably, "but your manner, day in and out, has shown that you are wholly absorbed in Miss Haight, and you have become correspondingly obnoxious."

"By conversing with your honored guest?"

"Honored!" Holbrook echoed.

"If not, why is she your guest?"

"That, sir, is none of your business. We need not prolong this talk. We made no serious charge against you, and, in business, you have been all I could ask. Take your recommendation and go."

"Have you sent Vencila away?"

"None of your business, sir."

"It is my business, when I am made an innocent victim and the real offender is allowed to remain under your roof."

Francis rose in fierce anger.

"Get out of this office!" he shouted.

"No, sir, I am not going!" Murdock steadily replied, "and, what is more, I am not going to leave your service!"

"You are not?"

"No, sir."

"By the heavens! I will—"

"Stop, sir! There is no cliff here over which you can push me to death in Babel Run!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DESPERATE BID FOR SAFETY.

MURDOCK had counted the cost. If proof was not in his hands he was, at least, better armed than when he came to Jacob's Ladder. He knew Vencila's secret, and Shaggy Jim's letter, reliable or otherwise, was in his pocket.

Deprived of his situation, and forced to cease associating with the Holbrooks, he would have but small chance to secure coveted proof, and, as affairs could not well be worse, he had decided to make the first fight then and there.

Holbrook was angry and ready to do any act of violence, but the paymaster stood before him as calm and unmoved, outwardly, as the mountains that hemmed in the town.

And Gideon made the last startling retort in cool and measured accents, but he had never looked so eagerly and intently as he now did to see the result of the shot.

Would Francis betray confusion?

The question was soon answered; the mine-owner fell back a step as from a literal attack, and a startled expression succeeded to anger in his face.

"What's that?" he demanded.

"I know you better than Lemuel Holly did!" steadily returned Gideon.

"What has Holly to do with the matter?"

"He had much to do with Babel Run."

"Why do you mention him?"

"I was thinking how he died—died looking at the light which shone in the window of his home."

Francis grew white. Of course he had never told any one how Lemuel died looking at Milly's beacon-light, and as the late senior partner could not have told it, it followed that, after all, there had been a witness to a part, or the whole, of the tragedy.

Many words might have made an impression upon Holly's slayer, and a long story would have worried him, but now, in one sentence, he had received proof not to be doubted.

He might have been accused in a fictitious narrative, but no falsifier could have known of the beacon-light.

Gideon saw the impression he had made, and decided not to carry out his purpose of showing Shaggy Jim's letter, unless such a course became necessary.

"You talk at random," Francis managed to answer.

"Don't writhe under the lash; meet the danger boldly. You were brave enough when Lemuel was pushed over the cliff without warning."

"He fell."

"He was flung over."

"By whom?"

Murdock shrugged his shoulders.

"We need not discuss that point. You and I know how two men came down the trail together, but paused by the cliff; we know how one bade the other look at the light of his house, and, while he looked, flung him over to death. It was a fatal beacon-light!"

By chance Murdock had used the exact term, "beacon-light," by which Francis had always referred to the light in communing with his thoughts, and the words impressed the guilty man anew. At that moment, too, Gideon remembered the scene when the junior partner visited Lemuel's grave, and he impressively added:

"He is still watching over us!"

Holbrook sat down suddenly. All the aggressiveness gone out of him.

"Don't you think I can retain my situation?" continued the paymaster, with an unpleasant smile.

Francis did some rapid thinking. He dared not challenge Murdock to produce proof, and to continue the subject under any other condition would be folly. The aggressive part of his nature came to the front. He had removed Lemuel from his path; could not this daring and dangerous paymaster be removed, also? At that moment, in imagination and intention, Francis wrote Gideon's death-warrant, signed it, and sealed it with the seal of coveted safety. The hour and the way must be determined later.

"You talk wildly, Mr. Murdock," answered the employer, "and I can only account for your strange and disconnected remarks by supposing that you are under the influence of strong drink, but I see no reason why we should quarrel."

"No?"

"As I was about to add when you started off on your homily, you will please work a two weeks' notice in my office. At the end of that time I may be prevailed upon to retain you, but don't make it necessary for me to warn you again as to your conduct."

Gideon bowed gravely.

"I thought a compromise could be arranged," he observed, quietly.

"You may resume work, if you please."

"Very well, sir."

Both men spoke as if their relations as employer and employee had never been interrupted unpleasantly, and Mr. Murdock went back to his desk. The door closed between him and Francis, the paymaster dipped his pen in ink and began writing with every sign of outward composure.

Appearances were deceptive. As the pen glided easily over the paper Gideon was thinking.

"He means mischief! Has he doomed me as he did Lemuel? If so he will find that I, unlike poor Holly, am forewarned and forearmed. Let him go on!"

The forenoon passed without any clash, and Murdock went home to dinner as usual. The moment that he saw Milly he knew that his appearance was a surprise, and he was not long in deciding that she had received a promise that he should not eat there again.

Such was the case, and the lady of the house seized an early opportunity to ask Francis for an explanation.

"The fellow is going," answered Holbrook, "but he begged so hard for two days of grace that I granted it."

"Is he sure to go then?"

"He is!"

Francis shut his jaws tightly, and his eyes gleamed strangely. After a pause, he added:

"The paymaster has promised to leave town, never to return. He will keep the promise, too!"

"I wish you could give me the same assurance in regard to Matthias Haight and his niece."

"Possibly, I can. From words I have heard dropped, I suspect that they may intend to go at the same time," explained Francis, indulging in fiction.

"I wish you could give me assurance of the fact."

"But I can't, just now."

"I would like to know why you are not master in your own house. Are you afraid of them?"

"Afraid? Don't be absurd, Milly!"

"Then you are very indifferent to my peace of mind. What if they are old friends of yours? What if Matthias Haight once did you a service? Is that any reason why they should outrage all decency in regard to me, and be upheld in it by you?"

Milly had yielded to one of those sudden, fitful outbursts of temper peculiar to a weak, ill-balanced nature. Francis was not long in soothing her, but the affair left its mark on their lives.

"Lemuel would not have allowed me to be abused thus," thought Milly, brooding over her troubles. "It was an unlucky day for me when he died!"

While Francis was thinking:

"She suffers keenly, and I can not relieve her, just now. What if my plans fail, anyhow, and Milly remains at the mercy of those devils? I am not sure but Milly would be better off if Holly had lived!"

Husband and wife went to sleep that night with more of a cloud upon their lives, as regarded their feelings toward one another, than had ever existed before. The retribution was working in many ways, and Francis realized it fully.

He was superstitious enough to ascribe it, not to chance, but to the vengeance of fate, yet not weak enough to yield.

He intended to fight that adverse fate every step, and yield only when compelled to abandon hope.

He did not sleep soundly that night, and when, after some hours, he became fully awake, he lay and listened until he heard the clock strike. It was the hour of one. He kept his position until another hour had passed, and then rose carefully and left the room with stealthy steps.

Going down stairs he opened the front door. The night was pleasant, and, though without the moon, had stars with abundance and splendor.

Francis did not look at the stars, but up and down the street, and he soon discovered two men.

They came forward quickly, and passed by his side.

"All right, boss," observed one.

"You are ready for work?" the mine-owner asked.

"Yes."

"Then come in. Remember my directions, and take every precaution against an alarm."

"Correck! You kin trust Perk Honey fer that."

"An' Cale Shaw ain't no slouch," added the second of the night wanderers.

"Enough! Go about your work!"

Mr. Francis Holbrook retreated upstairs, while Perk Honey and Cale Shaw, thus invited, walked in as nonchalantly as if they had always possessed the right to move in good society in the town. The master of the house lingered near the door of his own room and listened eagerly. He had no light, and all parts of the house were in darkness, but it was because some work is best done in the dark.

Honey and Shaw had ascended the stairs and were still on the move, but, though they were the worst characters around Jacob's Ladder, he did not move to check their nocturnal movements in his house.

He heard them at the door of Murdock's room and listened intently.

What would be the result?

Would his scheme work well, or would the paymaster arouse and foil it?

Francis had no desire to mix in the affair, for he wished to pass as an innocent man if there was any failure, but he was deeply interested. There was a long pause, during which he at times held his breath in order that nothing should escape him. Then came the sound of a slight struggle, and he knew the two outlaws were with their prey.

How would it end?

His orders had been to take Murdock from the house and dispose of him outside, but he felt that he could bear it calmly if the fatal blow was dealt right in that room. He would all the sooner be relieved of danger.

Silence had succeeded the late sounds. What did it mean?

CHAPTER XIX.

A STARTLING SURPRISE AT THE OFFICE.

It was a painful pause for Holbrook, and he could hardly await developments.

Footsteps sounded in the hall—footsteps heavier than those with which Perk and Cale had skulked into the house—and Francis's hopes flashed up anew.

Were the outlaws taking a captive out?

They went down the stairs, and he soon heard the front door close gently. He hurried to a window and looked out. Three men were going down the street, and one walked between the other two as if weak or injured.

Francis found a lamp and lighted it; he went to the paymaster's room. Gideon was not there. The bed-covers were disarranged, as if by a struggle. He set to work to place them as if a sleeper had left in an ordinary way, but suddenly raised one hand with a start.

It was reddened with some moist substance.

"Blood!"

He whispered the word with a nervous start not to be expected from the man who had given a chapter to the history of Babel Run, but his emotion was practical; he feared lest that stain, left on the bed, might get him into trouble.

Investigation quieted his fears. But little of the red fluid was there, and that little was on a spot where, with the greater part of it removed, the mere stain would be visible only to eyes bent in rigid search.

Francis cleaned it away as well as possible, and then looked out the window again. The procession of three had disappeared. Holbrook drew a deep breath of relief.

"Exit, Gideon Murdock!" he muttered. "It will be a long day before your place can be filled at the office—or here. Was it instinct, or what made me have, at times, an unusual shrinking feeling, a vague distrust, when I surprised the paymaster in looking at me? Did he know of Lemuel's death before entering my service, or learn it afterwards?"

The question was considered only for a moment.

"It matters not, but I'd give many a dollar

to know just how he learned the secret. Does somebody else know it?"

The idea was startling. Francis had thought to bury the danger and Murdock in one grave, but, for the first time, he remembered that he had no assurance that Gideon alone held knowledge of his crime.

After a short time he recovered from his alarm. If any one else knew of it, would not the revelation have been made before?

"Probably Murdock, himself, saw the deed done, and has kept quiet in order to hold a good position. His death will do all I hoped, and I shall be safe—safe!"

Flattering himself with this belief, the mine-owner went to bed. He had dealt the first blow to secure safety, and the second should soon follow; the Hights must be removed also. The plan was already formed, and it was one so bold, original and aggressive, that he felt sure of success.

When he finally fell asleep again he rested the remainder of the night in the peaceful fashion characteristic of an honored citizen.

Some surprise was expressed when Murdock did not appear at the breakfast-table, but, when it was learned that he was not in his room, it was agreed that some errand had taken him away.

At the usual hour Mr. Holbrook went to the office. He was unusually careful to see that he had his key, for, unlike previous mornings, he could not expect to find the paymaster already there, and work under way.

Reaching the building he thrust in the key and turned it. He was too much absorbed in thought to notice that the door was already unlocked, and he entered without suspicion of the surprise in store for him.

He entered—and stopped short.

Gideon Murdock was at the desk, as usual!

The paymaster raised his head and spoke in calm, business-like accents.

"There is a letter from Gray & Leighton, acknowledging the receipt of the specimens sent, sir; and one from Ball & Howard in regard to the missionary fund. No further mail this morning, sir."

Francis did not answer. Specimens and missionary funds were subordinate matters at that moment; he could only stare mutely at the calm paymaster.

He could hardly believe what he saw. Murdock, alive! Impossible! Impossible, or—was it a fatal fact?

"Ball & Howard state that it is desired to purchase a piano for the use of the natives at Urijanjikanejekiko, Africa," added the paymaster, evenly.

"You, here!" exclaimed Francis.

"Yes."

Mr. Holbrook felt a chill creep over him.

"I left Honey and Shaw out in the hills,"

Gideon continued.

"What do I know about them?" demanded Francis, feigning innocence.

"Nothing, of course."

"Then why mention them?"

"I agreed to relieve them of the labor of reporting to you, and hereby announce that they did not kill me," remarked Murdock, in a business-like voice, as he affixed a stamp to a letter.

"You talk in riddles."

Gideon turned sharply.

"Don't be a fool, Holbrook! You hired those scoundrels to kill me; they tried it and failed."

"I hired them? It is false!"

"Of course you won't confess it, but the fact remains. I expected you to do just this, sir, but did not look to see assassins in my room. In a measure I was surprised, but I gave them, a tussle, and drew blood on Honey. Then I went out with them, and was conducted to a gulch north of the town. There, I enjoyed a sight few men over are blessed with—the pleasure of looking at my own grave!"

Francis said nothing, but Gideon brushed a speck of dust off from his coat and went on:

"Your agents had kindly dug the grave, but I objected to it. I told them, and proved the fact by measurement, that it was two inches short. I objected to being crowded, and they agreed to lengthen the grave. They neglected to kill me before doing the other job, and, as a result, did not kill me at all. I watched my chance, pitched into them and licked them like sin."

The paymaster turned the page of a book where the accounts of the Bald Eagle Mine were kept, and added:

"Are we to accept B. N. Bliss & Co's offer, and ship them the ore they ask for, sir?"

The cold nonchalance with which Gideon mixed up tragedy and business increased Holbrook's chill.

"You are a fiend!" he exclaimed.

"Don't confuse my identity with your own, Francis," placidly answered the employee.

"Did Honey and Shaw say I set them on to you?"

"Yes."

"They lied!"

"Oh! I reckon not."

"They did. I, treat with such knaves? Absurd!"

Once more Murdock turned away from the desk and faced the owner of the Bald Eagle.

"Mr. Holbrook," he deliberately replied, "let us understand each other. You killed Lemuel Holly by flinging him to death over the cliff of Babel Run. When you learned that I knew your secret, you set out to murder me, in order to secure safety. You hired Honey and Shaw—"

"I declare that I am innocent—"

"And they tried the job and failed. Who left the front door of your house unlocked, so they could enter? Who tampered with the door of my own room? Holbrook, you beat against the bars in vain; I flogged your ruffians into a harmless state, and forced a confession from them, but it was not needed. Save your words; you are guilty and I know it; denials will be in vain."

For once Francis was convinced.

"I suppose you intend to try and get me arrested?" he returned, in a husky voice.

"Arrested? Certainly not!"

"What then?"

"Why, I'm not going to let a trifling disagreement rob me of my situation. I shall continue right along as your paymaster and secretary, and you will find me as attentive as before."

"Continue, here?"

"Yes."

"After what has occurred?"

"Yes."

"I would rather pay you double your salary, and have you go away!"

Gideon smiled, and that smile made Holbrook's flesh creep. It was full of menace, malignancy, conscious power and triumph, and, to Francis, so suggestive of the Evil One that he would not have been surprised to see hoofs and horns appear upon his companion.

"Mr. Holbrook," pronounced the paymaster, deliberately, "I couldn't think of leaving you. I have always liked my situation; at present, I am infatuated with it. On all sides I hear men tell how noble, kind, generous and public-spirited you are. Such a man is a treasure, surely, and, having become associated with him, I am not going to leave. My dear sir, I am going to stick to you, share your hours of ease, labor, pleasure and worry, and be at your elbow to act as your friend and adviser. No one else could do this as I can, for no one else knows so much about you!"

Francis was appalled. The words were bad enough, but the cold, pitiless way in which they were uttered, and the smile which hovered in Gideon's face, were a hundred times worse.

Have this man always by him? The mine-owner felt that death would be preferable to that. It would be death, anyhow; one of lingering torture.

"I'll give you a thousand dollars to go away forever!" he cried, vehemently.

"No!"

"Three thou-and!"

"No."

"Five!"

"How you do plan to squander Lemuel Holly's share of the Bald Eagle! You stole his half of the mine and his wife, and murdered him. I'm afraid you will yet repent that, Mr. Holbrook!"

Repent it! Francis thought, as he looked at the cool avenger, that he would give all his wealth to have Lemuel back from the grave alive and well!

CHAPTER XX.

NICK WILL, AND NICK WON'T!

With a strong effort Holbrook forced himself to answer:

"Mr. Murdock, your conduct is remarkable and erratic to an extreme. I deny emphatically that I ever did harm to Lemuel Holly, or tried to harm you. I do not know why you rush to such wild conclusions, but your fancy seems harmless. We will let it rest for awhile, but when I have more time, I will try to convince you. This is all for now!"

Assuming a commanding, somewhat haughty air, the mine-owner entered the inner office and closed the door. Once there he did not try to keep up his manner any longer. Murdock had escaped his trap, was a dangerous man.

How was he to be got out of the way?

The night before, with his plan nicely arranged, Francis had thought the way and the means easy, but it was different now.

Gideon had escaped, and it did not any longer seem easy to put him out of the way.

Francis was utterly unmanned, for dangers lay so thick around him that he almost despaired of meeting them. He was threatened with exposure for killing Holly, and attempting the same thing in regard to Murdock; and the Hights held possession of his house, menacing him with arrest for bigamy. Milly, too, was suffering, and he could not relieve her.

"Not one of these things would be so if Holly had lived," the guilty man thought. "I should not be a bigamist or a murderer. Would that Holly was alive!"

It was not remorse—Francis did not pity Lemuel; he pitied himself. He had sold his soul to obtain Milly, and, while prosperous, had every day congratulated himself upon his bold stroke. He saw, however, that his crime had involved him in great trouble and peril, and

would have brought Lemuel back from his grave if he could.

While he was meditating the office-door opened, and in came a big six-footer of a man, who advanced half-way toward Francis and then allowed the butt of his rifle to drop with a thump to the floor.

"Mornin'!" growled this person. "Reckon yer know me, don't yer?"

"Yes."

"I'm North-land Nick."

"I remember you well."

"Had a hole through my kerkuss, an' would 'a' gone cavortin' over the divide, only an angel keered fer me an' saved the ol' man's life."

"Leonis Vane. Just so."

"Know she'd been in trouble this mornin'?"

"No."

"She was. She an' your wife, Milly, was out. That durned snake, Percy Sinclair, met 'em, an' tried ter force his comp'ny on ter them."

"On to my wife?" cried Francis, with interest.

"What was the result? Tell me quickly—"

"I smashed him!"

"You did?"

"I did, by Cain!—so!"

Grim old Nick hammered his own knee to illustrate, dealing a blow which would have put a more delicate leg in jeopardy.

"You saved my wife from a blackguard? You—"

"Come off! I didn't save yer wife; she was along, an' had ter be helped by the same flop o' my fist. I saved Cherry Cheeks, otherwise Leonis; that's who I saved. Great fiddle-strings! didn't I chuckle at the chance! Yer see, I'm Leonis's guardeen, I be!"

"A right good one, too. I see how it was, Friend Nick; the ladies were together, and you saved them both. I hope you chastised Sinclair well?"

"Dunno w'at yer mean by chastised, but I thrashed him like sin. I've come on a business proposition."

Nick rolled his tobacco vigorously in his heavy jaws, and then took a shot at a stray fly and deluged it with the black juice.

The strange, grim old hunter was an object of curiosity to Francis. His rough, unceremonious ways had often made the mine-owner doubt that he was a good citizen, but, accepting Leonis's opinion, he had condescended to think better of the big man from the Grizzly Ranges.

"What is the proposition?"

"Want ter fight yer battles."

"You do?"

"Yes, by mighty!"

"How do you know I have any?"

"How erbout the Hights?"

Francis changed color. Was here another man who was going to lay unpleasant secrets bare?

"What of the Hights?"

"Milly don't like 'em, you don't, an' Leonis don't. As fer me, I don't like 'em as wal as you do. Now, I kin see you're *afereed* on 'em. You ain't a fightin' man, an' don't want a skirmish, but I ain't built that way. I grow fat on scrimmages, an' next ter grizzlies, I like ter tackle humans. I like Leonis; she likes Milly; Milly's your wife; so say the word, and out go them snakes!"

"What would you do?" Francis asked.

"Send 'em flyin'!"

The mine-owner studied his big companion.

"Do you mean, kill them?" he bluntly asked.

"Do! Wal, skeercely, mister; skeercely! I ain't no assassin, an' nobody can't say I ever was. I'm a rough old chap, I s'pose, fer so folks tell me; but we ain't no right ter take w'ot we can't give back. Human life belongs ter One who knows when ter take it, an' send His poor, weak critters on the last trail; but it ain't fur us ter hurry the job. I hate a man who don't respect human like wuss than I do snakes, an' snakes is the only thing ever created that is too mean ter hev any hopes o' goin' ter some future paradise."

Nick's acquaintances in Jacob's Ladder would have been surprised had they been present then. He was exhibiting another side of his nature than bolsterous roughness, and solemnity of utterance kept pace with the sentiments expressed.

His views did not please Holbrook, but the latter made the most of them and rendered his thanks.

"As Leonis's guardeen, I'm bound to help her frien's, so you hev only ter call on me," added the hunter.

"I'm greatly obliged, but, at present, not in need of your help. Should any crisis occur, I'll not fail to remember you."

Nick looked disappointed.

"I'd like ter fire them Hights out."

"They are going soon, anyhow."

The hunter let the subject drop. If he had been encouraged a little he would have told one fact known, thus far, only to himself and Leonis—that he had seen Vencila on trial in another town for burglary. As Francis would not admit that he wanted to get rid of the Hights he was, even on the brink of discovery, prevented from knowing that he was not the only soldier in the field who had a vulnerable spot.

Evidently, fate did not intend to help him.

As North-land Nick went away he bestowed a long, unfriendly glance upon Gideon Murdock. There was no good reason why he should dislike that gentleman, but dislike him he had, ever since hearing Leonis speak unfavorably of him.

Work progressed as usual at the office that day. The paymaster had never been more devoted to business, and on all doubtful points he consulted Francis quietly and politely, seeming to have the latter's interests as much at heart as ever.

When office hours were over, Gideon went out with a settled purpose, and did not rest until he had found North-land Nick. The veteran was outside the town, sitting upon a rock and looking around with a dissatisfied expression. He did not grow any more cheerful when the paymaster appeared.

"Good evening, friend Nick," Gideon began, pleasantly.

"Evenin'," growled the hunter, ungraciously.

"Are you enjoying Nature?"

"Nothin' else; don't like men! Grizzlies is all right, fer they hev brains, but men—ugh!"

"Your views are about as near right as we can get. By the way, have you always been a hunter?"

"Ever sence I was eight years old."

"No doubt, you can follow a trail as unerringly as a bloodhound."

"Young feller, I kin."

"How would you like to do something in that line in these parts?"

Nick, with conversation turned upon his loved calling, had been growing less ungracious, but the question brought a shadow of suspicion to his face.

"Who's ter be trailed?"

"A missing man. I want to find him, but I, in spite of some years' experience in the Rockies, am not a traller. If you would consent to help me, for pleasure or money, I would make an arrangement satisfactory to you."

"Who's the man?"

"A mountain hermit, known as Shaggy Jim."

"What's the trail?"

"As far as I know there is none, but I hope that due search may lead to its being found. The old man has long lived in the hills near here—where, only he knows—and his coming and going must have left some sign."

"Why do yer want ter find him?"

"I believe the man is sick and suffering."

"Why so?"

"He has not been seen for a long time."

Nick stroked his beard and eyed Murdock critically. If almost any one else had made the proposal to him he would have caught at the chance to break the monotony of his life, but, with his prejudice against the paymaster, he became suspicious at once.

"Don't think I'll do it!" he decided, gruffly.

"Why not?"

"Don't want the job."

"Not even if paid for it?"

"Mister, you are a persistent chap, an' seem bound ter hev the truth right out. Wal, then, I don't keer ter work fer you!"

"Why not?"

"Don't like yer!"

"Thank you for your frankness," answered Gideon, smiling. "There is nothing like having a clear understanding, and you have given the best of reasons. We will drop the subject."

Nick growled an inaudible something in reply, but his thoughts worked more to the point.

"What's this chap got in mind? I'll consult Leonis an' Holbrook. They may be able ter guess what is up."

CHAPTER XXI.

A FORGED CHECK APPEARS.

WHEN Francis Holbrook came home, that night, he sought for his wife at once.

"Milly," he announced, "I must go out of town, to-morrow, for a few days."

"Why?" Mrs. Holbrook asked, her face clouding.

"The evening mail brought me a letter from Granger & Sweet, of Ten-spot Deck, who say that I must come and attend to our unfinished business, of which I told you before."

"And must I stay here alone with the Hights?" cried Milly.

It was Francis's turn to grow gloomy. The business at Ten-spot Deck was very important in a financial sense, and Milly knew it. He had hoped she would spare him the pain of hearing remonstrances.

"It is only for a day or two, Milly."

"One day?"

"Well, including the journey, possibly three."

"Life will become unendurable here, before you return."

"But, Milly, don't you see that I *must* go? We have a good deal at stake, in a money sense, on the business with Granger & Sweet."

"Take Vencila along, and I won't say a word!" replied Milly, sharply.

"Surely, you are not jealous of her?"

"Jealous! All I ask is to be relieved of her company; that's what worries me. I give my leave for you to take her along—yes; you may clope with her, if you wish."

Clouds rested heavily upon the lives of the Holbrooks. Milly had married Francis out of mere selfishness, and to avoid the necessity of labor. If she had married with a better motive, and had been a better woman, the present complication would have affected her differently.

She knew that her husband was afraid of the Hights, and that their presence was at once a danger, a menace, and a source of trouble and worry, but she had never been moved by pity for him.

Knowing no affectionate devotion, she had pitied only herself now the Hights were there, and had constantly blamed him for not ridding her of them.

Her own manner toward Francis had changed. She was peevish, irritable, and sharp of speech, and wholly deaf to reason. The miserable man saw their harmonious relations being strained daily, and themselves drifting apart, and he had to bear it the best he could.

He had sold his soul for Milly, and slain a worthy man, and now, when he needed her sympathy most, he received only reproaches.

"Lemuel is being revenged!" thought the mine-owner. "I did not end all when I threw him into Babel Run!"

Making an effort, he said what he could to smooth over the new trouble. He did not want to elope with Vencila, and had no love for her, he declared; while as for her presence there, she would soon go away.

"The old claim!" bitterly answered Milly. "You have brought your new love here, and you are bound to keep her."

Francis was always patient with Milly; he was patient now, and did his best to quiet the storm. He did not succeed. She flung venomous, fretful speeches at him for a while, and then relapsed in sullen silence. Harmony was not restored, but the fact remained that he must go to Ten-Spot Deck.

He went aside and, sitting down alone by a window, looked out gloomily.

Milly's conduct hurt him deeply, though it aroused no resentment. It was strange that this man whose whole career had been marked with dishonorable deeds, and who had finally rushed to the rank of a murderer, should love a woman so deeply and unselfishly; but so it was, and he suffered as keenly as if he had been a worthy man in all ways.

"Better for Milly if Lemuel had lived!" he thought.

It was singular how this idea haunted him of late, but the senior partner would never come back to life.

In the morning Francis went to the office to look over the mail before taking the return train which was to start him toward Ten-Spot Deck. He must leave all business to Gideon Murdock, but, oddly enough, he felt that this was safe, and he was right.

The paymaster was zealous in his efforts to build up and protect his employer's financial affairs.

Another business man of the town hurriedly entered the office.

"I hear you are going away, Holbrook," he said, "and I thought I'd call your attention to a check of yours which I've just taken in trade. It is for fifty dollars. I presume you wish me to present it to the bank."

"Let me see it," was the careless response.

Francis received the check, but, after one glance at it, looked up abruptly.

"Where did you get this?" he demanded.

"From Andrew Robbins, the merchant at Razor-back Bar."

"It's a forgery!"

"It is?"

"Yes; I never saw it before."

"By Jove! that's odd. Robbins isn't the man to deal in bogus paper."

"He's been victimized; there are plenty of people at the Bar capable of it. You will see that this check is made payable to 'A. D. Holbrook,' and indorsed 'O. K.' I know no A. D. Holbrook, and never heard of him. Evidently, the forger—who wrote my name cleverly—rung in my surname to create a belief that he was a relative. The check is a forgery. Give it back to Robbins!"

"I'll ride over at once."

Francis looked at the clock. He needed to make haste to catch the train, and he went at once.

Razor-back Bar lay in a direction almost opposite. Holbrook's recent visitor saddled his horse, rode over the range trail, and was soon at Andrew Robbins's store. Once there, he was not long in making the case plain, as far as he knew it, but Robbins exclaimed:

"This is confounded strange!"

"Did you get the check of a total stranger?"

"I had it from Holbrook's cousin."

"If any one claimed to be that, he lied. Francis plainly told me he had never heard of any one of the name of A. D. Holbrook. He was a fraud."

"It wasn't a 'he,' but a young lady, and I had seen her at Jacob's Ladder in Holbrook's company."

"Impossible!"

"I tell you it's so. She sailed in here one day lately, and she said she wanted three yards

of dress goods, to match a pattern she had already, and she pointed the piece out on the shelf yonder. She took the three yards and handed over this check, remarking that she was cousin to Francis S. Holbrook, of Jacob's Ladder. As I'd seen her with him I took the check without talk, and gave her forty-six dollars and twenty-five cents in change."

"She humbugged you. You never saw her with Holbrook."

"I say that I did!" declared Robbins.

"Perhaps you can find her again?"

"If she's in Jacob's Ladder, I can!"

The merchant banged his hand down upon the counter, and then added:

"Your horse is at the door; I'll order mine, and we'll go to the Ladder together. Of course it rests on me to see that you don't lose anything on the check, but I'm not going to sit down and lose a fifty without a kick. I saw that female at your town before she showed up at my store, and if she's there now, I'll find her again. Come on!"

Ten minutes later the two men were riding toward Jacob's Ladder. The place was reached in due time, and Robbins sought Deputy-sheriff Day first of all and laid the case before him.

"No such woman here, sure enough," Day declared. "Holbrook is the only one of the name in our town."

"It is not hard to surmise now, that she gave a false name, but I say that I saw her here. She may be here now. What kind of a looker is Holbrook's wife?"

"She is tall, slender, blue-eyed and fair-haired. She has a rather long, narrow face, and quiet manner."

"Not she. Any other female in the family?"

"No. That is, no regular member. There's a guest, a Miss Haight, there just now."

"Describe her!"

Day did so, and Robbins exclaimed:

"That's the one!"

"But she's Holbrook's honored guest."

"I don't care if she's an honored angel with six pairs of wings. If she's the one who passed the bogus check on me she is going to be arrested within the hour—that if you will do it."

"Of course I will, for that's my duty; but you are all on the wrong track. To prove it, and settle the matter promptly, I'll take you to Holbrook's house at once. I know his wife well, and can make it all right; but, mind you, we must go slow. Milly Holbrook would resent any slight cast upon Miss Haight, and we must use delicacy, you see."

"All right; only go ahead."

They went, and, asking for Milly, were soon in her presence. Mr. Day felt ill at ease, but, after some casual conversation, summoned up courage to approach the subject.

"Is Miss Haight in, Mrs. Holbrook?"

"She is just outside the house, under the big tree, as you can see by looking out."

Robbins looked, and then exclaimed:

"That's she; that's the one, sheriff!"

Day was dumfounded.

"You must be wrong."

"I'm right, I tell you."

"What is it?" Milly asked.

"My dear madam," answered Day with agitation, "I beg that you will control yourself and be calm. Do not give way to emotion, or misconstrue our motives. We must pain you, but it is solely against our will, and I am sure there is a mistake which can be explained away. Believe me, I have full confidence in your guest, so do not be pained if we speak of her—I know how highly you regard her—and if we seem to make charges against her, do not blame us—"

His stammering utterance was cut short. A look of joy flashed over Milly's face.

"Charges against her?" cried Holbrook's wife. "What charges do you—can you make?"

"Don't blame us, for, of course—"

"Will you speak out?" Milly demanded.

"I make no charge—"

"I do!" declared Robbins; "I charge her with the crime of forgery, and I can prove it, too!"

"Thank Heaven!" cried Milly.

Sheriff Day's eye and mouth opened wide.

Milly's face had not been so bright in many days, but it suddenly occurred to her that the information was too good to be true.

"Can you prove it?" she asked, anxiously.

"I can," Robbins asserted; "what's more, I will, if you will call her in."

"It shall be done at once."

Milly called Emma, the servant, and gave the order, but remembering her past ill-luck in securing attention from the defiant object of inquiry, amended the message and told Emma to state that a gentleman wished to see Vencila.

"What is the exact charge?" Milly added.

"The young woman passed a forged check upon me," explained Robbins.

"Are you sure it was she?"

"Yes."

"What is the penalty?"

"A term in prison."

"Thank heaven!" Milly again exclaimed.

Sheriff Day was dumb with amazement. After all, his fears that they would anger and

grieve the hostess, he heard in her voice, and saw in her expression, abundant evidence that she was really very happy to hear the charge against the guest. Day's surprise was equaled only by his relief.

Vencila entered the room with a grand sweep of her skirts, her head carried proudly erect.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE LAW, THE LADY AND THE THREAT.

It was with the impression that her caller was some young man who had yielded to her charms that Vencila came upon the scene, and her manner was that of a gracious conqueror, but her hopes were not to be realized.

She recognized Robbins at once, and, for an instant, her gaze wavered; then she became remarkably calm.

"Miss Haight," spoke Milly, undisguised triumph in her voice, "this is the gentleman who wishes to see you—Mr. Robbins."

"Merchant at Razor-back bar," added Robbins, suggestively.

Vencila bowed graciously.

"I am pleased to meet you, sir."

"The pleasure is mutual," grimly returned Robbins. "I called to see you about your recent purchases at my store. Did the goods give satisfaction?"

"Excuse me, sir, but I do not understand," Vencila remarked, looking perplexed.

"I refer to three yards of dress-goods, at one-twenty-five a yard."

"You are still obscure; I don't know what you mean."

"Perhaps this will quicken your memory."

Robbins held up the slip of paper which had caused so much trouble, and continued:

"A check, signed with the name of Francis S. Holbrook, and made payable to A. D. Holbrook, which you gave me at my store, in payment for the dress-goods."

"I? Indeed, sir, you are mistaken," quietly, amiably answered Vencila. "I never saw or heard of the check, and, what is more, was never in Razor-back Bar in my life!"

"You deny all knowledge of the check?"

"Yes, sir."

"And I say that you passed it on me at my store!"

"Sir?"

Vencila spoke with an air of gentle indignation and reproof, and looked so innocent that Sheriff Day squirmed uneasily in his chair.

"Oh! you needn't deny it, for I will swear to your identity. Not only is your face absolute proof, but you had on your fingers the same two rings you now wear, and the same dress."

"I never was in Razor-back Bar!" declared Vencila, with evidence of rising anger.

"Indeed!" cried Milly; "but you told me, some days ago, that you were there, and spoke of visiting a store which must have been Mr. Robbins's!"

"Who asked you to speak?" sharply demanded Vencila.

"I think I can speak without asking leave."

"You have mouth enough."

"At least, I am not a forger."

"You are—"

In her hot anger Vencila came near telling the important secret of her life—that she had married Holbrook before Milly ever saw him—but prudence caused her to pause. She realized even then, that she was in serious trouble, and must look to Holbrook for relief. With the secret told, her hold upon him would be lost. She tossed her head disdainfully as a finishing touch to the unfinished sentence, and Mr. Day was greatly relieved to see by this little skirmish that no such cordial relations existed between the women as he had expected.

"Do you deny that you passed the check upon Robbins, Miss Haight?" he asked.

"How many times must I say it before the idea gets into your thick heads?" imprudently demanded the girl. "I never saw the check, or Robbins, and I never was in Razor-back Bar!"

"The check is a forgery."

"What's that to me?"

"It's a good deal to you!" retorted Robbins, "for you did me out of fifty dollars on it."

"You speak falsely!"

"Do I? I reckon my word is as good as yours."

"Miss Haight, perhaps you can tell where you obtained the check," advised Day.

"I never saw it before."

"You'll have to arrest her, Day," decided Robbins.

"Arrest me!" cried Vencila, with flashing eyes.

"Yes; on the charge of forgery."

"I'll make you all repent it, if you do!"

Vencila's temper was thoroughly in operation, and she wheeled upon Milly and added:

"This is your work!"

"I had nothing to do with it."

"I know better; joy and triumph are plainly expressed in your face. I know your good will, but don't you think I am done up; I'll be on top sooner or later, and then I'll make you wish you had never been born. Don't forget that!"

Robbins was enough of a man of the world to read a good deal of Vencila's nature. The oc-

casional specimens of coarse slang with which she expressed herself were not those of a refined person, while the way in which they were said was that of a hard character.

"Arrest her, Day," he repeated.

"Are you prepared to back it up?"

"Yes."

"Then, it is my duty to do as requested."

He bowed to Vencila, to indicate that she was already under arrest, but that person began to be uneasy.

"Wait until Francis returns," she directed. "He will tell you that the check is all right. Forged? Absurd!"

"He has already pronounced it forged."

"He will decide different when he returns."

"I don't intend to wait. He says it's a forgery, and I shall not leave you free to skip out just when you see fit, and leave me in the lurch."

"I'll stay right in this house."

"No!" declared Milly; "you will not stay here! This house is no longer a harbor for you, for you disgrace it. Whatever Mr. Robbins may do, you leave here at once. I have endured your presence long enough, but you go now, never to return. I've had enough of you!"

The speaker was rather profuse with words, but she wanted to make herself understood. It was a moment of grateful triumph. She had endured so much, and complained so unavailingly, that five times as many words would not have done justice to her feelings. She was glad, just then, that Francis was not home; before he returned she would have Vencila out of the house, and the eventful step would be taken irrevocably, she thought.

Francis could like or dislike it; she did not care.

Vencila regarded the hostess in a manner which revealed a good deal of the evil in her nature; and which would have frightened Milly had not the latter been so exhilarated.

"You will see more of me!" was the retort; "I'm coming back here to stay!"

"Never!"

"I say I shall."

"Then you will have to turn burglar; that's the only way you can enter the house."

"Francis will invite me here!"

"He will not!"

"And I'll come in spite of you!"

"Wait until you are out of jail."

"Francis will get me out."

"He don't invite forgers."

"Even they would be too good company for the person he calls his wife!"

Having carried on this duel of words to her satisfaction, Vencila turned to Sheriff Day.

"Wait until my uncle, Matthias Haight, returns—I expect him every moment—and he will make satisfactory arrangements by which I can remain at liberty until Francis comes back."

This was a good plan for Vencila, but it did not meet with Robbins's approval. Even if it had been in the regular channel of law affairs, the fact that so much animosity existed between the accused and one whom he regarded as the best friend she had, was enough to make him wary.

Guilty, Vencila certainly was, and her general honesty was not well indicated when her hostess would talk thus.

Robbins was bound the arrest should go on, and as Mr. Haight was not at hand, it did go on. When Vencila saw that arguments and appeals were alike useless, she made ready as nonchalantly as if going on a trivial errand.

"An old hand!" thought far-sighted Robbins.

"Upon my word, I can't see why such a man as Holbrook should give her a home."

When all ready Vencila turned to Milly.

"Be sure and keep my room aired, dear, for I shall return in a day or two," she remarked, sweetly.

Her confident manner momentarily staggered Mrs. Holbrook, who made no reply. The adventures then took Day's arm with an easy grace.

"All ready," she added, cheerfully.

Ten minutes later she was in the new jail—the first female prisoner ever there—and the news began to go abroad much like an earthquake. It was unexpected, surprising and mysterious. Holbrook's guest arrested for forgery! What did it mean? Was it true? The latter question was asked at first; the former, when the people had seen Day and learned the known facts. Even then they could not understand it, and the sheriff, being the most perplexed man in town, could not enlighten them.

Milly had rushed over to see Leonis in an excited, triumphant and joyous mood, and was pouring out her story in semi-incoherent words. Free from the millstone, at last! Her home was purified; Francis, convinced of "that woman's" guilt, would be all her own again; and happiness would return to the household after the past reign of misery.

"Her star has set forever!" Milly declared.

"I suppose she was crushed?"

"No. Her nerve is astonishing; she took it very coolly. Why, she even declared that Francis would set her at liberty."

"Do you think he will?"

"Do I? Of course not. Why should he?"

"In the past she seemed to have strong influence over him."

"He won't defend a forger. Oh! I am safely rid of her, and she shall never enter my house again."

"But you have said she seemed to have some hold upon Francis."

Milly's face clouded as she remembered her frequent and unavailing efforts to have Holbrook send Vencila away, and her own opinion that he was afraid of the guest.

"I would sooner die than live with her a day again!" was the emphatic reply. "But there is no fear of that—I think."

About the same time Mr. Matthias Haight came walking deliberately down the street, only to be stopped, when near the jail, by Sheriff Day, who explained what had taken place, and added that Vencila was even then within the building.

Matthias listened without the least change of expression. If he felt anger, sorrow, surprise or dismay, he did not betray the fact, but listened with the composed attention of one who is moved merely by a sense of duty.

When Day had finished, the lawyer evenly asked:

"How long would it take a messenger to go from here to Ten-Spot Deck and return, using railroad and horse, as circumstances permit and demand?"

Day considered the point, and gave the answer, adding:

"This would give him a good night's rest at the Deck."

"If he did not stop for the rest, he would get here some twelve hours sooner?"

"Yes; but only a matter of life and death would excuse a man from attempting the journey without rest."

"Can you suggest a man to go in haste and return at leisure?"

"Certainly; young Tim Welch is just the person."

"Send for him."

Day's desk was near at hand, with ink, paper and pens visible upon it. Matthias sat down and began to write.

"Odd!" thought Day, watching the calm lawyer. "Francis Holbrook is at Ten-Spot Deck!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

REMARKABLE EVENTS AT THE JAIL.

"I AM going to try my luck in getting rid of Murdock, too."

So declared Milly, as she prepared to leave Leonis and return home.

"What do you mean?" was the answer.

"I have sent Vencila flying, and I want to be rid of my other incubus. I want Murdock to leave."

"Milly," returned Leonis, gravely, "why not be satisfied with your victory, and forget Mr. Murdock?"

"I don't like him."

"There are worse persons than he."

"Oh! yes; you are infatuated with him since he did you a favor," was the fretful retort. "I can't endure the sight of him. Even when Francis was sounding his praises to the sky, I abhorred the man. At times I would surprise him as he was secretly looking at me, and there was something—I don't know what—in his look that worried me. I tried to tell what it was; to read the man; but was wholly unable to do it. I could dislike him, and I did. Francis promised to send him away, but I can see he has weakened. Now, I am going to try my luck."

"Mr. Murdock is eccentric, I admit," earnestly answered Leonis. "But I owe him a double debt of gratitude. Not only that, but his kindness to me after the last rescue was remarkable. He was not over-attentive or gallant, but, without making the fact apparent, he anticipated my wants, and made the discomforts of the night seem slight."

"That was because he was in love with you."

"Ridiculous!"

"Why do you blush?"

"It is the sunlight, foolish Milly."

"As you please."

Milly was not sympathetic, but she had seen aright; Leonis had blushed! Why? She asked herself the question after Milly was gone, and was vexed at her own folly. Why should she blush? She could not say what was in Gideon Murdock's mind—and, of course, did not care—but it was a fact that, except the spirit of gratitude and forgiveness, nothing had at any time entered her mind which would explain the blush.

"Ridiculous!" she thought. "Naturally, I feel grateful, but my opinion of him before cannot be so very far out of the way. The idea that I should give a serious thought to him!"

"Day-dreaming, Miss Vane?"

Leonis gave a nervous start as the voice unexpectedly sounded at her elbow, for it was the voice of Gideon Murdock, and there stood the paymaster just outside the window.

"I hope your thoughts dwell on pleasant subjects," he added, as she remained silent.

How vexatious! For the second time Leonis felt the color deepen in her face.

"The subject was not pleasant," she returned, somewhat defiantly, "but we will let that pass. Do you manage to settle down to hum-drum life, after our adventure in the hills?"

"Matters are not hum-drum at Holbrook's," was the dry reply. "You may be able to guess that if you have heard the latest news."

"Concerning Vencila?"

"Yes."

"What will you do without your favorite?"

"If you mean Vencila, I see no reason for the term you have used; I am not aware that she is a favorite with me."

Leonis remained silent.

"There are some things not easily understood, Miss Vane," pursued the paymaster, earnest to a surprising degree for him. "The world always judges by outside show, and as a result, almost invariably judges wrong. The lady referred to and I have been inmates of the same house and, necessarily, acquaintances. We are nothing more. Isn't it a trifle hard to connect my name with one now arrested for forgery, and that, too, under circumstances which leave little doubt of her guilt?"

Gideon smiled as he asked the question—and Leonis could not but notice that frankness had given place to the old strange, unpleasant element in that smile—but, nevertheless, he seemed anxious as to the answer.

"If so, pray forgive me," Leonis answered.

"I am not your judge, Mr. Murdock."

"Yet, I could not ask for a better one."

"Is that irony?"

"Certainly not; why should it be?"

"I am not proud of my record in the past—but let that pass. Mr. Murdock, why don't you go to the hotel, to reside?"

"Why should I?"

"I should prefer it to—to a private family."

"Why?"

Gideon's eyes questioned her more than his lips, but also would not explain. She foresaw the reception Milly would give him, and wished that it could be avoided, but she could not betray Milly's confidence.

"It would be my preference; that's all. Do you have charge of the office when Francis is away?"

"Yes."

"He must like your work well."

"The relations existing between Mr. Holbrook and myself are hardly those of the typical employer and employee," gravely returned Gideon. "By the way, what do you suppose Matthias Haight's first step was when he heard of his niece's arrest?"

"What was it?"

"He wrote a letter to Mr. Holbrook, and sent it off by special messenger."

"What was his object?"

"I only know what I have told you, but it seems that Francis is to be summoned home."

Leonis's face had clouded. With her knowledge of what had gone before, she could not but wonder if the mine-owner was to be called back to defend the forger. Was it possible that such was the audacious scheme?

She did not care to discuss the possibility with Murdock, but, when he was gone, her mind dwelt upon it, and much to her uneasiness. She had suggested the idea to Milly, but that the Hights would have the boldness openly to summon Francis to their aid was more than she had expected.

When her thoughts turned to another channel, it was to make Murdock the object. Somehow, the man appeared to be changing before her very gaze—changing almost visibly. Not only had he abandoned the coldness, indifference and slowness of perception which had been so offensive to her, but his voice and expression had changed equally.

Leonis wondered at it, but was not sure whether the change was all in him. It was not, for her own feelings had something to do with it, but it was certain that Gideon suddenly had resumed the frankness and natural conduct he abandoned when he came to Jacob's ladder.

Milly did not keep her threat and try to eject Gideon that evening. He spoke to her of business affairs of importance—matters that had come up during the day and needed attention at once from some one of experience—and she had enough regard for dollars and cents not to be rash.

After all, the paymaster had done no great evil, as far as she knew, and it would be folly to try and get rid of him at a juncture which would leave the business without any head.

The following morning, soon after people were astir, a note of alarm was passed along the street.

"The jail has been broken open, the prisoner is gone, and Sheriff Day is killed!"

Rumor had one-third of truth in its statement, which was more than the average. The discovery was made by two miners who, passing along the street, noticed that the door stood open, and, seeing Day prostrate on the floor inside, imagined all that rumor had said.

They entered hurriedly.

There were signs of a struggle, the office furniture being overturned and broken, but Day's full-colored face was not that of a dead man. He was bound and gagged, however, and his

attempt to speak only resulted in a gurgling sound.

They hastened forward to release him, but, at that moment, a voice rose in the next room, which was a cell, and tranquilly sung:

"Nut-brown maiden, thou hast a bright blue eye for love."

Nut-brown maiden, thou hast a bright-blue eye;

A bright blue eye is thine, love,

An! the glance of it is mine, love;

Nut-brown maiden, thou hast a bright blue eye."

Nothing more inappropriate to the occasion than this weak little song could be imagined, but it was not that which impressed the rescuers most.

The singer was Vencila Haight, and, though she had been at perfect liberty to walk out through the open door, there she was, still a prisoner!

The moment that he was free the sheriff sprung to his feet.

"Well, I'll be condemned!" he commented, as forcibly as his stiffened jaws would allow.

He then stalked into Vencila's cell with a most serious air. She was sitting by the barred window, looking out composedly.

"So you're here!" he exclaimed.

"Where else should I be?"

"You had a chance to skip."

"I didn't skip."

"No; and that is what puzzles me."

"Innocent people have no reason to skip."

"Well, I'll be shot if I don't hope you'll prove that same. I never expect to have another inmate who won't skedaddle when there's a chance. I'll send you a right good breakfast, ma'am!"

"Thank you, sir; you are very kind."

No one could speak more amiably and sweetly than Vencila did—so declared Mr. Day, later, and he was not far wide of the truth. She did not look like a criminal, then, or act like one, and the sheriff almost wished that she had improved the chance and gone. Duty obliged him to lock the door of her cell, and he did it, though with reluctance.

"I'm beat!" he then declared, to his own rescuers.

"What's up?"

"The jail was broken last night; I was thrashed silly; the chance was given the girl to prance out, and she didn't go. If that don't take the medal, what does?"

The speaker faced his companions gravely, and wagged his head in a dumbfounded way.

"They knocked at the door, and when I asked who was there, gave the name of the hotel-keeper. The darkness was against me, and I opened the door. Then they pounced on me, and had me tied up before I could squeal."

"I recognized Percy Sinclair, the gambler, at the head of them, and he wasn't long in showing why they had come. He took my keys and opened Miss Haight's cell-door, and then, says he:

"We've come to rescue you. Follow us!"

"What's that?" says she.

"We've broken jail to get you free. The way is open, and all you have to do is to come on."

"She asked for a bill of particulars, and he gave the whole report. I declare, I was knocked all to pieces when she made answer:

"I am much obliged, but won't go!"

"Eh?" says he, surprised.

"I'm innocent," says she, "and won't run away like a captured desperado."

"But the evidence is dead against you!"

"Yet I shall be acquitted."

"Now, don't be foolish," says he; "they have got you dead to rights, and you are sure to be found guilty if you are reckless enough to stay and meet your trial."

"Can't help that," says she; "stay I will. You are very kind to think of me, but nothing can induce me to run away. I'll stay and prove my innocence!"

"And, gents, all that Sinclair could say did not move her. He declared he had made it impossible for himself to live in town by breaking open the jail for her, and asked for a reward. If she stayed he would lose all for her sake, which was just what he was not willing to do."

"It wasn't any use; the girl vowed she would not leave, and she didn't; and they had to go away without her."

"When they had vamped I called to her, for they had left me bound, and her door was open."

"Get a knife and cut my bonds," says I, in a mumble.

"Get it yourself," says she.

"But I can't," says I.

"Stay where you are, then," says she. "Suppose I'm going to do a favor to the man who arrested me? Not much! You can lie right there on your back until you wear the floor out," says she.

"I couldn't argue with her, for the gag in my mouth prevented me from talking much intelligibly; and I'll be shot if she didn't let me stay tied. There I lay all night, groaning in spirit as well as in flesh, and there she sat in her room, all the doors open and nothing in the world to prevent her from skipping, but she didn't go."

"Twice more during the long hours I made an appeal to her as well as I could, but she didn't try to make out my mumbled words, and was as sassy as blazes! Is she angel or devil?"

This profound question made Mr. Day serious for some time, but he finally aroused.

"This won't do. I want that infernal Sinclair, and I'm going to have him if he can be found. I'll teach him better than to outrage the laws like this!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE BAR, THE PRISONER, AND THE WITNESS.

ALL Jacob's Ladder was busy in discussing the latest sensation, and deeply interested in it. They did not know what to make of it. The opinion had prevailed that Vencila was guilty beyond any doubt, but there would have been a reaction in her favor had it not been for her refusal to liberate the sheriff.

That good man was a good deal at sea, himself. One moment his gratitude to Vencila was so strong as to make him express himself in her favor strongly; then he would remember how "sassy"—to use his own word—she had been to him, and he would talk in a way quite different and not complimentary to her.

Mr. Matthias Haight was interviewed, but proved to be as non-committal as man could be. He had taken up his quarters at the hotel after Vencila's arrest, and was the calmest man, outwardly, in town.

His one significant remark was to the effect that Vencila would be cleared when Holbrook returned, and this, taken in connection with the fact that Francis had been sent for, and that the girl had refused to break jail, was deemed very important by the people.

But how would Francis save her?

Robbins vowed that the prosecution for forgery should go on.

Jacob's Ladder boasted of a local judge, and this gentleman called upon Haight during the forenoon.

"I have been asked by Mr. Robbins to set a time for the trial, sir," he explained, "and as I have no business to press me, I wish to make it mutually agreeable. I suppose you would like some delay?"

"No, sir," Matthias calmly replied.

"But you are entitled to it."

"As a lawyer, I know that."

"Don't you wish to send for witnesses?"

"No."

"But if you could prove Miss Haight's previous good character—"

"Quite unnecessary."

"Then what will be your defense?"

"You will see at the trial."

"I'll give you all the time you wish—"

"To-morrow, at ten, A. M."

"So soon? Why, I would not advise you to use such precipitation—"

"Would the time suit Robbins?"

"Why, yes; he's all ready."

"Make it ten, A. M., then."

Mr. Haight glanced at a time-table of the new railroad which lay before him. One of the trains was marked to arrive at the hour he had just mentioned.

"I think you are very hasty—"

"Allow me, sir, to manage my own side of the case!"

Curtly Matthias broke in upon the well-meaning judge, and that gentleman relapsed into silence. He held the frigid old lawyer in some awe, for he was a judge whose experience on the bench and at the bar was limited to the mines, and the repeated rebuffs had not been calculated to soothe his feelings.

"Robbins will go out of court cringing like a whipped cur," Haight added.

The judge rose.

"Very well, sir," he returned, stiffly, "the case shall be called at ten, A. M. to-morrow."

Haight made no answer, and the judge went out an angry and disappointed man. He had gone out of his way to oblige the lawyer, and felt the retuff keenly. Once, he was tempted to defer the trial for a fortnight, and keep Vencila in jail, but he was afraid this would help her. Surely, it was better to allow the haste and prevent any witnesses from a distance from congregating to give their help.

The judge told of his woes; the news spread fast; and Jacob's Ladder waxed indignant. The official, in his anger, had not scrupled to say that Haight had snubbed the town on account of its size, and the breeze that sprung up was prodigious. Those who had been inclined to side with the Hights deserted the cause, and many became bitter in their opposition.

It seemed as if no lawyer would want to take the case on its merits after that, but Matthias walked the streets among men who ignored him, or flung angry words at him—walked, and was calm and cold as ever. Such indifference staggered the people in general, for it seemed to be akin to mental madness.

The night passed, and the day of the trial found the people even more interested than before. Trials there had been previously in the mountain town, but never one which caused such wide-spread interest as this. Just why the general run of citizens felt so absorbed in it they

did not know, but curiosity had much to do with it.

Some one observed that Matthias was the only calm man in the place, but this verdict failed to take Gideon Murdock into consideration.

He attended to his duties without a ripple of visible excitement, and only smiled when others spoke of the case. That morning, Milly had remarked, triumphantly, that Francis would not get back in time to be present, but Gideon had consulted the time table of the railroad, made a few outside calculations, and settled in his own mind just how it would all end.

Shortly before ten o'clock there was a general closing of places of business, and the paymaster followed the example and went over to the hall.

All of Jacob's Ladder was there, "male, female and children," as one old miner stated.

Vencila had already been escorted over from the jail, and was in the prisoner's box, with her uncle by her side as attorney. Both retained their usual characteristic. Haight was cool and unmoved, while Vencila wielded a fan languidly and, with the crowd staring at her as at a great criminal was as nonchalant and self-possessed as a society lady in a private-box at the theater.

"What a hopeless fight Holbrook has, in trying to beat such a pair!" Murdock thought.

The judge began the trial with more directness than regard for legal form, and then the prosecuting attorney rose.

"Your Honor," said he, "I hereby ask for a postponement of the case."

Matthias Haight was on his feet at once.

"I object!" he declared. "The time of the trial has been fixed by consent of all parties, and there is no reason for changing it."

"I am the only attorney for the prosecution, and I was not consulted," protested the other lawyer. "Your Honor, we cannot go on without Francis Holbrook, for without him we cannot prove the check a forgery."

"That is no reason for postponement," asserted Haight.

"It is the best of reasons."

"The prosecution should have thought of it before."

"I thought of it as soon as the case was given me."

"You thought too late; the hour is fixed."

"Are you a judge?"

"As much as you are a lawyer."

"At least, I am not the uncle of a forger!"

It was nothing new to see lawyers in a quarrel, but the cool, passionless way in which Matthias met the fiery retorts of his adversary was admirable. Even the last personal fling made no impression, but Haight dryly remarked:

"Your antecedents, like Judas Iscariot's, do not interest the world!"

The prosecuting attorney waxed angrier than ever, but the court saw fit to interfere at this point. He knew at least one of the lawyers carried a revolver, and, in his opinion, a courtroom filled with women and children was not the place for a duel.

"Gentlemen, you will please be calm," he remonstrated. "There is no reason for such difference of opinion; surely we can arrange it amicably. As long as Mr. Holbrook is not here—"

"Holbrook is here!"

So spoke a man near the entrance, and then the crowd divided and the owner of the Bald Eagle Mine advanced toward the bench. His step was not that of a conqueror, nor of one eager to speak in the name of justice and law, nor of one with agreeable work on hand.

He moved slowly, lifting his feet as if they were weighted, and those nearest him were struck with the haggard appearance of his face. Dusty, weary and somber-faced, he was very different from the sleek Francis Holbrook of former days.

"He's sick!" muttered more than one voice, as the new-comer passed.

Heedless of these comments, the wretched man went on in his dull, plodding fashion, until he was near the judge and other prominent parties to the case.

The prosecuting attorney brightened up.

"We are now ready to proceed," he declared.

"So are we," agreed Haight. "The sooner the case is settled the better. We ask that Holbrook be sworn."

Francis turned his dull eyes upon the speaker, and then to Vencila, and a shiver passed over his frame. He had the greatest sacrifice of his life to make, and it could bring him only bitterness and fresh trouble.

The judge hastened to shake hands with Francis.

"Glad to see you back," he asserted. "You've come just in time to take part in the trial. I'll explain the case—"

"It is not necessary," was the stolid response.

"But you don't understand—"

"It is about the check."

"Yes, but—"

"Let me see the check!"

The judge was still anxious to explain, but the prosecuting attorney handed over the paper that had caused all the trouble.

"We are glad to see you back in time to

help us out, Mr. Holbrook," he remarked, cordially.

Francis looked at the check apathetically, and then raised his head and spoke. He did not look at the judge, or at the prosecuting attorney, but at Vencila, and if, instead of being the speaker, he had been listening to his own death-sentence, he could not have looked more forlorn and forsaken.

"When I examined this check in my office," he uttered, like a machine, "I was in haste to catch my train, and did not give it the attention necessary. I pronounced it a forgery, little knowing the trouble I was innocently to cause. I now retract all that I said—the check is genuine!"

"Genuine!" gasped the judge.

"Genuine!" exclaimed the prosecuting attorney.

"Genuine!"

The word passed Milly's lips in a husky whisper, inaudible even to her nearest companion. Her high hopes went down with a rush. She had expelled Vencila, but the present hour was to put the last touch to her downfall—so Milly had thought. Now, a sickening feeling came over her which would have defied description.

After that chorus nobody had anything to say. The judge and the attorney looked blankly at Holbrook. Leonis Vane glanced at Vencila, and saw a smile of insolent triumph on her face.

"I drew the check in haste, one day," Francis went on, after a pause, "and forgot it right after. Yet it is all right. I signed it; the check is genuine!"

Mr. Haight rose, unmoved as ever, and coolly spoke:

"Your Honor, I ask that the case be thrown out of court, and the prisoner discharged."

"But, surely, there is some error!" protested the amazed judge.

"Holbrook has set it aright."

"But I don't see—"

"It is not necessary you should. Holbrook says the check is genuine. What more do you want? I ask you to discharge the prisoner."

The judge turned to Francis in a bewildered, helpless way.

"Well, of course it's as Mr. Holbrook says—"

"I ask you to discharge Miss Haight!" interrupted the mine-owner.

CHAPTER XXV.

A PLOT VAGUELY SEEN.

THERE was opposition. The prosecuting attorney could not rest satisfied to see the case go to pieces thus, and Robbins, the Razor-back Bar merchant, wished to make sure he was to get his fifty dollars; but, as there was no such thing as making out a case when Holbrook had declared the check genuine, it did not take a very long conference to kill off the legal opposition.

That there was another kind of opposition, strong, even though silent, was easily seen by the few who looked at Milly. Her face was white, and in her eyes was a wild gleam.

Francis had lied for Vencila, and she knew it.

She did not know the motive, but had a theory of her own, and the fierce jealousy and anger the circumstance had aroused made her face an eloquent picture.

"The prisoner is discharged!"

The judge spoke the eventful words and the farce was over. Vencila smiled, but neither she nor Matthias extended thanks to any one. They quickly left the court-room together.

Leonis had been by Milly's side all the time, but, in this critical state of affairs, she dared not say anything. It was Milly who spoke first.

"Let us go!"

"But Francis—"

"What of him?" Milly asked, sharply.

"He is near—don't you want to speak to him?"

"Speak to him! No!"

The bitterness of the reply spoke volumes, and Leonis urged the point no further. She was sick at heart, herself, for she knew Francis had spoken falsely in regard to the check—everybody knew it—and she did not see what hope remained for Milly.

They had to press through the crowd to leave the court-room, and, by the time they had done this, Francis, too, had made his escape and gone his way.

The people went home perplexed and confused. On one point there was perfect unanimity of opinion: all agreed, as has been indicated before, that the mine-owner had lied. The check had been a forgery, but, after proclaiming it so, Holbrook had appeared in court and perjured himself by declaring the contrary.

When the explanation of this fact was sought for, no unanimity existed. Theories were scarce and conflicting, but, as it was known that Milly had been overjoyed by Vencila's arrest, it was generally thought that Holbrook cared more for the adventures than for his wife.

The public favorite of former days fell from his pinnacle like a stone. Few persons there were so deeply conscientious as to care whom Francis loved, but the affair of the check, in their opinion, was serious.

When one of their leading men thus juggled with truth in a matter of business, what evidence had they that business principle would not be

violated again, and Jacob's Ladder made to suffer thereby?

Milly made no haste to go home. She was not impatient to meet her husband, and wished to regain her wits, if not her calmness, before going there. Hence, she stopped with Leonis for half-an-hour, but finally made her way to the Holbrook residence.

As she approached it the words of a song suddenly fell upon her ears, and, looking up, she saw Vencila sitting at an upper window.

It was audacity supreme for the adventuress to return thus, but Milly was not especially surprised: her faith in Francis had gone out like a candle, and she was prepared for anything. Beyond an increase of color in her face she gave no sign of emotion, but the sight settled one question in her mind.

She entered the house, and found Francis in the parlor.

If her gaze had been any longer that of affection she would have seen that he was looking old, thin and wretched, but a gleam of hope came into his heavy eyes at sight of her. He rose and would have greeted her with the old warmth, but she motioned him back.

"No!" she said, coldly.

"What do you mean, Milly?"

"You are not to touch me again."

"But, Milly—"

"Go to Vencila!"

"Milly, do not reproach me—"

"I say go to your charmer!"

The wife sat down and regarded him with stony calmness. Her meekness of nature did not show then, for she was moved by a fixed purpose, and it gave her dignity foreign to her character.

"Milly, you are unintentionally wronging me—"

"If that is true, why not call Vencila in to give you a recommendation? You have lied her out of trouble; she ought to reciprocate."

"In regard to the check—"

Once more Milly broke in on his meek and forlorn utterance, curtly saying:

"I care nothing about the check, except so far as it has gone to give me evidence. I have accused you of being in love with Vencila, and you have denied it. Now, I have absolute proof. For her sake you have branded yourself a liar before all of your townsmen, and given me the desired proof. Wait! Hear me out! I am not going to reproach you, for it gives me no sorrow. I never cared for you, Francis Holbrook; I married you to be supported by you. After what has occurred to-day, I prefer to be supported at a distance, and I am going to leave you free to enjoy Vencila. Before night falls again I leave your house never to return. If you will give me a sufficient allowance I will make no trouble for you; if you refuse the allowance, I shall sue for a divorce and take what the law will give me!"

There was no stopping the flow of her words, and the wretched man sat in dumb agony and listened to her.

He had never ceased to love her; he loved her then; and every word cut to his heart.

For a moment after she was done his thoughts wandered, and the head-stone to Lemuel Holly's grave seemed to be before him with that ominous sentence staring him in the face—"He is still watching over us!" And then came the thought: "Great God! I have lost all that I gained by the crime; Milly hates me!"

The painful knowledge gave him strength and words with which to defend himself, and he feverishly replied:

"Milly, listen to me! You do me wrong, not intentionally, but through ignorance. The Hights are going away—"

"The old story!"

"The time is close at hand. Hear me, Milly!"

Excited as he was the mine-owner had prudence enough to speak in a low voice, and he now moved closer to his wife and lowered his tones still more.

"If you have hated that evil pair, I have hated them worse. If they have tortured you, I have been tortured more. Yet, I had to endure their presence, for, to be frank, they had me at their mercy. Ruin stared me in the face, and, though I dared not confide in you, it was as much for your sake as mine that I allowed them to come in. But it is over; they are going away."

"When?"

"Before to-morrow night."

"Another postponement!"

"Milly, listen to me! I do not deceive you; I swear that it is so."

"Have they promised?"

"No, and they will not, but they are going just the same. I have studied the matter and laid my plans, but they are not in it. I shall not speak to them until the time comes, and if you would see our home rid of its evil guests, you will be as still as I. Our hopes all depend upon it; if they have warning, they may beat us out, yet. Promise not to hsp a word!"

His manner had grown eager, and Milly could not doubt that, for some reason, he was much in earnest, but her shaken faith was not to be restored at once.

"If you are so anxious to get rid of them, why did you come to Vencila's aid when she was almost at the door of the prison?"

"For the same reason that I let them into this house—I was afraid of them!"

"The check was forged."

"Yes."

"Was it necessary for you to save her?"

"I was saving, not her, but myself, and you!"

"Tell me the secret of their power over you, and if it is plausible, I'll not be unjust."

His frankness in regard to the check had impressed Milly favorably, and she began to waver.

"Don't ask that now," he returned. "One of these days I hope to tell all, but not now. You would not fully understand, anyhow. Only be patient for a little while, and all will be well."

He was pleading as earnestly as a lover, and Milly gave way another point.

"Let me go to Leonis's home until the Hights leave, and I will accept your terms."

"Don't ask that, Milly; think what people would say. Remain here to-night, and another night shall see our lives cleared of the leprosy upon them. It is not necessary for you to act the martyr, however; if you wish, you can plead a headache, go to your room, and not meet the Hights at all."

Again she was favorably impressed. His own manner was so different from anything that had marked it recently, so hopeful, that she could not help feeling its influence.

She agreed to the plan. For a moment she was tempted to face the Hights defiantly, but her courage was not quite equal to it; she decided to have the fictitious headache, and at once retired to her sleeping apartment.

Matthias, without a word, to the Holbrooks, had returned from his temporary exile at the hotel, and had quartered himself at Francis's house again. He and Vencila had the field nearly to themselves. Even after business hours, both Francis and Murdock were nearly as much invisible as Milly.

The office had been open during the afternoon, and Gideon had been not a little puzzled to account for his employer's manner.

He could imagine vaguely how much it had cost Holbrook to go into court with that falsehood on his lips—for the paymaster, unlike the citizens of the town in general, knew just why Vencila had been saved—and it seemed natural that Francis should be crushed utterly, but such was not the case.

Holbrook attended to business as usual, and the late events did not seem to trouble him—indeed, there was perceptible to Gideon the same hopeful air, dim but striking, which Milly had noticed.

"What does it mean?" Gideon mentally inquired. "What cause has he to feel fresh courage when his cause seems the darkest? Does he meditate a bold stroke for liberty from the vulture grasp of the Hights?"

The idea was suggested to him by the attempt upon his own life, when Perkins Honey and Cale Shaw led him out to die by Holbrook's command, and, with the suspicion started, it grew upon the paymaster.

That evening he was very attentive to all that occurred at the house, though the fact that Francis avoided the Hights prevented him from studying the trio as he wished.

Vencila was gay and audacious. She had humbled her host and driven Milly to the privacy of her room, and she exulted over it as only one of low nature could. She was full of sarcastic remarks, and attempts at cutting wit, and did not hesitate to fling verbal venom at Francis whenever she had a chance.

Gideon shrugged his shoulders, when he had retired to his room and mentally brought all this back.

"My fair Vencila," he murmured, "unless your sagacity is equal to one-fourth of your audacity, which is not likely, you need to fear the wrath to come!"

And the speaker placed a brace of revolvers under his pillow and went to bed.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE DESPERATE GAME TAKES SHAPE.

FRANCIS HOLBROOK, watching covertly, had seen all of his household but himself retire for the night. He smiled when this point of time was reached—a strange and forbidding smile.

"It is their last sleep under this roof!" he muttered.

The clock did not yet indicate the hour of nine, but both Vencila and the old lawyer had spoken of feeling sleepy, and set the example of going early. The mine-owner had overheard these remarks, and the fact was responsible for the comment which followed his assertion recorded above.

"So they are sleepy, eh? The drug is working, and they will be too far gone to hear the first alarm."

He ascended to his private room, which adjoined his sleeping-room, and looked around with a return of that peculiar smile. His house was furnished richly for that mountain country, and he took note of the fact then.

"It represents a good deal of money, but it must all go!" he thought. "The work must be

complete; I'll save nothing but the few business papers."

He had turned toward the desk when Milly entered. He deferred the work and talked with her, and again she saw the hopeful *something* in his manner and voice. Vencila was sleeping in the same house, but the wife was still under the influence of the vaguely-founded revulsion of feeling, and she talked amicably with Francis. The cloud upon their lives was not referred to, and good will was shown by both.

Afterward, Milly wondered what influence had been upon her that night.

Later, they retired, and Milly fell asleep. No drowsy visitor came to Francis, and none was wanted. The clock struck eleven. Shortly after the master of the house arose.

He went again to the private room, unlocked the desk and passed fifteen minutes in looking over his business papers. He selected several, put them in his pocket and relocked the desk.

Then he left the room and went along the hall until he reached Vencila's door. He listened attentively, but heard no sound. He tried the door; it was locked. He inserted the blade of his knife in the key-hole; the key was not in place.

Again he smiled.

Then from his pocket he took several pieces of lead, cut into strips, and thrust them into the key-hole until, evidently, no key could be used until the lead was removed. Thus the occupant of the room could not open the door in the usual manner.

"The lead will melt and leave no sign," Francis commented, as he turned away.

Next he went to Matthias's door and repeated the work just done. Some noise was occasioned by his operations, despite his efforts to prevent it, but he had no real fears of causing alarm. He had good reason to believe that the sleepy feeling of which the Hights had spoken was still in force, and would keep them fast in slumber.

His recent singular work had fastened the door upon each.

From this point he went down-stairs and visited the store-room. The means of illumination at the house was kerosene, and a can of this substance stood in the store-room—a can so large that it was no easy task to carry it with two hands.

This he proceeded to do, however, and, moving slowly under the weight, he passed into the next room.

Then began a singular proceeding.

Opening the can Francis poured the oil on the floor, in places, and on various other things at hand; and from that room he passed to another, and to a third, and to a fourth, until every room on the lower floor had been visited, and the can wholly emptied. Kerosene was everywhere.

He contemplated his work grimly.

"All is ready!" he commented. "Now for the final act in the drama!"

Igniting a piece of paper he again went the rounds, touching the flame to the most combustible points to be found, and starting a blaze here and there, which leaped up and licked the kerosene greedily.

Working rapidly, he tightly closed each room after him, leaving the fire to work its way. As for him, he went quickly up-stairs again and sought his room. Milly was sleeping soundly. He pressed his lips to hers, and then sat down to await the result.

It was a pause full of keen interest and suspense. What was being done below? How long would it take the flames to seize the whole house within their fiery grasp? Who would first discover the presence of the destroying element? How would the alarm be sounded?

These and many other questions passed through Holbrook's mind. He was excited, but in a triumphant mood. He longed to sing and dance, and to shout hilariously. If all went well he would soon be free. Free! What a blessed sound the mere word had; how much more blessed would be the reality!

"Devils!" he muttered, looking toward the rooms of the Hights, "you drove me too far. Now, reap the harvest!"

At last the mine-owner could hear the crackling of the flames below. The finest house in Jacob's Ladder was doomed, and thousands of dollars were being consumed by the licking tongues of fire.

"But it will bring peace," he thought; "peace to me and to Milly!"

He opened the chamber door, and was startled for a moment to see what headway the fire had made. All the lower floor was a furnace of heat, and flame and smoke were rushing up the stairway. The sight gave him a feeling of uneasiness; he did not wish to be the first to sound the alarm—would no one else discover the blaze? The floor was hot under his feet, though he had placed less oil under that room. It seemed as though the fire must soon burst through in other places—especially where the Hights slept.

Hark! the alarm, at last!

"Fire!—fire!"

The cry came from the street, and he uttered an exclamation of satisfaction. He waited

until a louder shout arose, and then tore open the door of his room, as if just aroused from sleep.

Then he saw a peculiar sight.

In the hall was Gideon Murdock, fully dressed, sauntering around with his hands thrust carelessly into his trousers-pockets, and a lighted cigar in his mouth. It was to be doubted that he was then smoking the cigar, for other smoke was so thick around him as to be almost stifling; but it was an impressive picture of careless ease and indifference.

Francis had only a brief view; the paymaster walked on and disappeared in the smoke; and then there was a puff like the flash of a handful of powder, and the fire burst up through the floor at a point near Vencila's door.

The barrier had been passed, and, after the first break, the flames came shooting up madly, spreading rapidly and seizing upon everything within reach.

Milly awoke with a cry of terror, but Francis was by her side in a moment.

"Be calm, my love!" he urged; "I will save you; you are in no danger!"

He lifted her with arms which seemed to be as strong as those of a giant. Outside the noise was increasing; other men had joined the first, and with their shouts was mingled other sounds as they pounded upon the door.

Francis had arranged his plan with care. There was a back staircase, and a back door. Near this quarter he had put no oil, and he believed it would be a safe way of retreat. If not, the window remained.

Holding Milly firmly, and sounding other words of cheer, he began the journey to safety, but, when once in the hall, he found that it was a fiery, dangerous way. The smoke was thicker and more troublesome than he had expected; it half-blinded him, and forced its way into his lungs. Then came a more furious burst of flame, and his flesh almost seemed to blister.

He was confused, but was pressing on resolutely when his foot struck some obstacle. He fell, and Milly escaped from his hold like an inanimate burden.

Half-stunned, choking and gasping, he struggled to his knees as soon as possible. He looked for Milly, but did not see her. He rushed about in the smoke.

"Milly! Milly!" he cried; "where are you? My God! where are you?"

There was no answer, and the fire singed the hair upon his head. His search became a maddened one. Forward, back; here, there; everywhere he rushed through that deadly veil of smoke and flame.

He stumbled and fell—fell over a human form. He put out his hands and touched the long, flowing hair of a woman.

"Thank heaven!" he gasped, gratefully.

He lifted her and hurried on. He had no knowledge of direction left, but chance guided his steps; he reached the back stairway, as he wished. Down he hurried. There, the smoke and fire was less oppressive, but he had scarcely strength enough left to move.

Just as he reached the door it was shivered by a blow from the outside, and he passed out safely. By that time a score of persons had assembled, and his appearance was the signal for a cheer.

Hardy miners were present who were ready to risk their lives, and they were about to rush up the smoking, curling stairs when, suddenly, several steps leaped upward, borne on the wave of a river of fire, which, in a twinkling, wrapped all the staircase in its embrace.

No one could pass there; even if the fire could be defied, the steps were gone.

"Are they all out?" some one shouted.

"I've seen Haight," a voice answered.

"And I saw the servants," volunteered a big miner.

"Who did Holbrook bring?"

"His wife, of course."

"Where is Murdock?"

"Where is the Haight girl?"

"They are still in the fire!"

Francis heard none of these excited, natural shouts. He had staggered forward until a safe distance away, and then dropped upon his knees. The woman was stirring in his arms, and three times he kissed her with passionate love in sight of his fellow-citizens.

"My darling! my darling!" he cried; "thank Heaven, I have saved you!"

Then he fell senseless to the ground, but the saved woman regained her feet quickly. The observers saw—not Milly, but Vencila Haight!

CHAPTER XXVII.

FRANCIS HEARS STARTLING NEWS.

"THE villain!" cried a miner, "I'll be one ter help h'ist him back inter the fire. Whar's his wife?"

"Thar is his 'darlin'!" sneered a second man, pointing to Vencila.

"He's let the truth out, at last."

"He ought ter be lynched!"

Unconscious of these angry comments, and equally unconscious of his strange mistake, Francis Holbrook lay unconscious. He was blackened with smoke, and his hair had been

singed by the fire, but he had swooned strong in the belief that his wife was as safe as he. Vencila's audacity had deserted her for once, and she stood gazing stupidly at the burning house.

"Here's Murdock!" announced the sheriff. "They are all out but Holbrook's wife."

Gideon had appeared among the group, quiet and composed, but the last words startled him.

"What's that?" he demanded.

"Milly is still in the house."

"Impossible!"

"I tell you, she is!"

Several men had brought a ladder forward, and Gideon suddenly seized upon it.

"The north window!" he cried; "no one can live on the lower floor."

His example was contagious, and the ladder was quickly put in position. Scarcely had it touched the wall before the paymaster was running up the rungs. Somebody shouted a warning when it became plain what danger he must dare, for the fire was carrying all before it; but Gideon kicked the sash to pieces and sprung inside.

"He never 'll come out alive!" declared one of the spectators, confidently.

Nobody disputed him. The stoutest-hearted among the miners were not inclined to follow Murdock's lead, and the opinion just expressed seemed only reasonable. All stood and watched the window. They listened, too; listened for a cry which would indicate that the bold rescuer was being overpowered by the flames.

Suddenly a shout sounded, but it came from the crowd! It was a cheer which announced a most welcome discovery. A man, black and grim, had appeared at the window, and in his arms he bore a woman.

Murdock had found Milly.

Up the ladder hurried other men to reach them, and both were soon safe on the ground. Milly was unconscious, but the paymaster, wiping the black stains away from his face, was as cool as ever.

The crowd cheered again, and all would have been perfectly happy had it not been for recollection of Holbrook's appearance among them.

"The scoundrel has gone back on his wife," asserted a rough citizen. "I thought it at the court-room, and I know it now. He kissed her right smart, and called her his darlin', or some sech dough-head talk."

The last confused remarks about "her" did not refer to Milly, and everybody knew it, but Vencila had disappeared. Matthias Haight had seen the kissing affair, and, though he knew it was all a mistake, he was wise enough to get his niece away. Knowing the drift of public sentiment, he was not sure she was safe in such company.

All the inmates of the house were out of danger.

The servants had escaped the most easily, and had no thrilling story to tell. Neither had Gideon, but that did not mean he could not have told something if he would. He held his peace and avoided all unnecessary talk.

A doctor attended to Milly and said that, unless she had inhaled fire, she was not seriously injured, and then she was carried to Leonis's home.

Francis, alone, remained on the scene, of all the actors in the red drama. He was allowed to lie without aid from any one. The doctor had gone with Milly, and no one else would even lift his head.

"Let him die!" growled one of the laborers in the Bald Eagle. "The world would be better off with him out of it!"

The roof of the house fell in; the flames flashed up fiercer than ever for awhile, and then settled down to complete the work of destruction. It was then that Francis stirred for the first time. Opening his eyes he looked around, and then, as memory returned, struggled to a sitting position.

"My wife!" he exclaimed. "Where is she?"

"What's that to you?" a former friend retorted.

"Tell me, was she injured?"

"No."

"Thank Heaven!"

"You infernal hypocrite! It's much you care about your wife. It's no thanks to you she escaped."

Francis did not realize the meaning of these harsh words—indeed, in his anxiety for Milly, he did not comprehend the words at all.

"Where is she?" he continued. "I brought her out—"

"Yes, you did!" was the ironical retort.

"What?"

"You left her to die in the flames."

"You speak falsely!" Francis retorted. "I brought her out, and I fell here. Where is Milly? Some of you men saw me when I came—"

"We saw you bring Vencila out."

"Vencila!" Francis repeated, bitterly; then, remembering that he had a part to act, he added: "I have not seen Miss Haight."

"Come off! You brought her out; you hugged her and kissed her a dozen times; and you called her your darling, and thanked Heaven you had saved her!"

"Kissed whom?" Francis sharply cried.

"Vencila."

"You lie, sir; you lie!"

The mine-owner was not fully clear of mind, or he would not have allowed himself to lose his temper. As it was, he spoke furiously, and a kinder-hearted man than the former speaker hastened to add:

"Holbrook, a man is not to blame for being confused in a time like this, and you may be sincerely mistaken; but this much is certain: I stood by when you escaped from the fire, and it is a fact that the woman you brought out, and kissed and called by terms of endearment, was Vencila Haight!"

Francis believed, at last, and an expression of horror overspread his face.

"Then, in Heaven's name, where is my wife?" he cried.

"She was saved by Murdock."

"But where—how—I don't understand."

"She was left in the doomed house, but, at the very last moment, Murdock entered boldly and succeeded in bringing her out. Only for that, she would have perished."

Holbrook was utterly bewildered. Thus far he had thought of Milly only, and he could not see how such a mistake could have occurred.

"Was she injured?" he asked, again.

"No."

"Whom did you say I brought out?"

"Vencila Haight."

"Alive?"

"Yes."

"My God!"

Francis almost groaned the words. With his mind freed of anxiety in regard to Milly, it resumed its own clearness, and the full meaning of the last information flashed upon him. Vencila, alive! Then he had plotted in vain, burned down his own house in vain, and still had his merciless foe to contend with and fear. The fact was a metaphorical lightning-bolt which overwhelmed him.

He said no more, but stood gazing at the burning remnants of his house. He did not give a thought to the fact that so much of his money had gone forever in that fire; he thought only of the one dread fact that Vencila had escaped death and was alive to keep up her war against him.

Blackened and singed, he was a hard-looking object, then, but not one of his former friends approached to offer aid and consolation. By and by he abruptly aroused.

"Where was my wife taken?" he asked.

"To Vane's."

Francis started away without another word.

"I s'pose you know where Vencila is?"

The words were flung after him by one of the group, but he gave them no heed.

"Gents, that man is a murderer in his heart," added the last speaker.

"Looks like it."

"I believe he set the fire, himself, and did it to get rid of his wife. She was left senseless inside, but he came out with Vencila, hugging and kissing her, and calling her his darling. Now, if that ain't sure proof, what is? Maybe he knocked his wife down, and stunned her so she would die there. Anyhow, he wanted her to die. It wasn't any chance that he deserted her, hunted the other woman up, and brought her out. He has shown his hand plainly, and I tell you that a man who would go back on his wife so, and rattle around on his knees outside with another female in his arms, ain't any too good to be rode on a rail!"

The angry speaker found plenty of sympathizers, and Holbrook's already-waning star almost went out of sight.

In the mean while, Francis had gone to Mr. Vane's. He was in a miserable frame of mind. When he decided to remove Vencila from his path by violence he had studied to find a way which would leave no chance for the breath of suspicion to touch him, even if, by any ill fortune, Matthias should escape the same fate.

The idea of burning his own house seemed to be an inspiration. Who would be shrewd enough to suspect him of that? Men do not usually destroy their property thus, when no insurance is upon it. When he had managed to drug both Vencila and Matthias, and, as an additional precaution, stop the key-holes to the doors, it seemed certain that they were doomed; but they still lived, and, no doubt, would be more dangerous than ever.

He reached Vane's house and entered. The first room was lighted but vacant, but, at that moment, Leonis came out of another apartment.

"Milly!" he cried; "is she safe?"

Leonis regarded him coldly.

"Yes."

"Let me go to her!"

He started, but Leonis stopped him.

"Wait!" she directed.

"What! is she injured? Is she— Tell me the worst at once!" he exclaimed, excited and alarmed.

"Do I understand that you wish to see her?"

"Certainly, I do."

"I will inform her."

"She is injured!" he cried, misconstruing the delay. "Has the doctor ordered everybody to be kept out? Surely, I do not come under that decree. Tell the doctor I must—I will see her!"

It was the emotion of a man who truly loved his wife, but Leonis regarded him pitilessly.

"It will all depend upon Milly," was the firm answer. "Remain here until I return; you are not to follow me under any circumstances."

She indicated a chair and he unwillingly sat down. Then she left him alone. Not yet did he suspect what was in store for him. When he received the first check he accounted for it on the theory that his wife was so seriously injured that the doctor had ordered absolute quiet, and anxiety for her prevented him from interpreting Leonis's manner aright. Now she kept him waiting until he grew very impatient, but finally reappeared.

He started up eagerly.

"Can I go in now?" he demanded.

"Milly refuses to see you!"

"What?"

"She sends word that she will not see you."

"Will not? You mean—"

"Just what I say!"

"Great heavens! why should she refuse to let me come to her?"

"Because," Leonis steadily, coldly replied, "she asserts that you have attempted her life to-night!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE WORLD GOES HARD WITH FRANCIS.

HOLBROOK looked in blank, bewildered dismay at the speaker. At last it dawned upon him that there was more serious trouble than he had thought, but he could not understand it. Finally, he made answer:

"You choose your words wildly—"

"The words are her own."

"And Milly says I have 'attempted her life?'"

"Yes."

"The terror of the night has affected her mind."

"Perhaps you think all of us are similarly affected. How did it happen," Leonis severely asked, "that you left Milly to die in the house, while you carried Vencila Haight out, and, kissing her repeatedly, called her your 'darling,' and thanked Heaven that you had been able to save her?"

"It was a mistake!" Francis cried, "I thought it was Milly—"

"Enough! Do not ask me to believe impossibilities."

"I swear that it is true. I was carrying Milly out when I stumbled and fell, and she escaped my grasp. I rose half stunned and bewildered, and searched for her in the thick smoke and searing flames. My hands encountered some feminine form; I seized the person and bore her out. I thought it was my wife, and was filled with joy, nor did I learn my error until I recovered from my swoon."

His vehement manner would have been convincing in a case less fatally against him, but, as it was, he spoke in vain. Leonis mercilessly answered:

"Milly says you deliberately flung her down on the floor to die!"

"It is false! She did not say it."

"She did, sir. Your own fall, and accidental loss of hold upon her, seems to have existed only in your prolific fancy. She states that you bore her out of her room to the hall, and then cast her aside violently, where smoke and fire were thickest."

"Then she is horribly mistaken. Let me go to her—"

He started, but Leonis blocked the way.

"No! She refuses to see you, and this house, if not her own, shall be an asylum of safety."

Leonis spoke with the dignity of true womanly firmness, but the mine-owner was mad with conflicting emotions. He raised his clinched hand.

"Out of the way, or—"

"Strike me at your peril, Francis Holbrook! My friends are within sound of my voice."

His hand fell like a paralyzed hand.

"I shall go mad!" he groaned. "Milly refuses to see me? Milly accuses me of trying to take her life? I will not believe it! Tell her to come to me; I'll take the word of no other person."

Leonis's mother appeared at the door.

"Have your wish, sir," she spoke, agitatedly.

"We cannot have a disturbance here, as it may do Mrs. Holbrook great harm; and if you persist, you will be ejected by force. At my request, and to stop this talk, your wife has put her sentiments in writing. Every word and expression is her own, and she has not been influenced by any one else. Read!"

She extended a note. He took it and saw a few lines in Milly's writing. He read eagerly:

"FRANCIS HOLBROOK:—If Providence had not interfered to-night I should be lifeless, and you would be a murderer. As it is, I know of your infamous attempt, and I will not see you—I will never look upon your face again, unless I decide to prosecute you at law. Go away! Go to Vencila!"

"MILLY."

The reader's hope died away. He believed at last, and the blow fell heavily. He was stunned and irresolute, and the act of breathing seemed as difficult as it had been even in the burning house. He felt as if air was a vital

necessity, and, crushing the note in his hand, he staggered out of the house, not speaking a word.

He walked on, heedless of direction. The fire had not died out, but he did not glance that way. He went blindly, with lowered head and plodding steps; he passed the town, ascended the hills for some distance, and then lay down on his face and relapsed into silence.

He wished to think, and think clearly, which he had not been able to do; but all came to him after awhile. He had burned down his house, hoping thereby to destroy Vencila and, also, all trace of the crime. In trying to save Milly he had saved the wrong woman. In some way Vencila had escaped both from the drug and from her room, and yet—fatal fact!—she undoubtedly would have perished in the fire had he not, in groping for Milly, made a mistake and saved her instead. When he stumbled and dropped Milly she had erroneously supposed that he cast her aside deliberately, so that she would perish, and this fact, together with his own error in publicly kissing Vencila for Milly, had served to ruin him.

Thus he studied it out after long thought, and the full misery of his position occurred to him.

"I can never convince Milly of her error!" he groaned. "She doubted me before; she will refuse to believe in me further. She is lost forever!"

Stung by this thought he hurriedly, nervously rose to a sitting position. Until then he had taken no heed of his whereabouts, but his mind had cleared wholly. Before, he simply had known that he was on the brow of a cliff; now, he discovered that he was sitting just where Lemuel Holly had stood the instant before he was flung to death in Babel Run!

The coincidence was too strong to be overlooked.

"Milly's beacon-light has proved as fatal to me as to him!" groaned the murderer.

In his own wretched state he could realize dimly, at last, how cruel his act had been, but even more vividly came the conviction that the hand of retribution was upon him, to punish and destroy.

He had lost all for which he had sold his soul.

Memory went back to the dark past. He remembered how he had loved and coveted his partner's wife. They had worked together day after day, and though simple-minded Lemuel suspected nothing, the junior partner had always been hoping some accident would occur and kill Milly's husband. There were grizzlies in the mountains to be feared, and falling rocks as they dug here and there, and the possible accidents of shaft and drift—and one of these might kill Lemuel, and Francis hoped it would be so, but Lemuel escaped all.

And the younger man had tried to get the other's wife in his power, hoping that some day he could use that power to his good. She was weak, indolent and selfish. He knew this, and had prevailed upon her to take loans of money, unknown to Holly.

More than once, week after week, the schemer did his work carelessly—or, rather, with careful insecurity—and left danger for Lemuel, here and there about the mine, but the senior partner escaped all until that fatal night when, yielding to sudden fury and the fear that Milly's home would soon be far away, Francis had hurled his victim to death.

How strangely fate worked!

Was it not well that, on the spot where Holly's earthly hopes had died away, Holbrook should bring the wreck of his hopes, and admit their destruction?

He looked into the dark gulf ahead of him, and the muffled roar of Babel Run appeared to call to him. For a moment he was tempted to take the leap and end his troubles, but second thought on the subject aroused all that was courageous and defiant in his nature.

He turned away and made a new discovery. A man was sitting on a rock only a few feet away, watching him composedly.

Francis recognized his paymaster.

"You here!" he exclaimed.

"Yes," responded Murdock, quietly. "I came out to get a mouthful of air."

"You escaped the fire, then."

"Yes."

"What did you see there?"

"Smoke and flames."

Gideon spoke with his usual nonchalance, and Francis was strongly reminded of the time when he saw him walking around in the smoke of the doomed house, so cool, and so indifferent to the progress of the devouring element. A new suspicion came to the mine-owner. Was it Murdock who had released the Hights?

"What do you know about the fire?" the questioner asked, abruptly.

"Nothing, except that you set it."

"If so you eagerly join in the devilish chorus sounded by the people—the people, who are never right, but, always ready to act as a rabble, are mad to condemn without proof."

"I go with no rabble, Mr. Holbrook. What they saw I care nothing for; what I know, I may never tell them. Yet, I saw you spread the kerosene and apply the torch. Stop a moment, sir; the house was yours, not mine; what you

did was none of my business, and I let it go on without remonstrance, of course."

"Perhaps you saved the other people?"

Francis asked the question in a low voice, and his hand rested upon a revolver which he carried in his pocket; but Gideon answered very quietly:

"I did rout out the servants, but no one else. I noticed that Matthias Haight's door was broken, and presume it was his own work. Further than that I know nothing; I did not help the Hights."

"You were moving around in a peculiar fashion."

"I wanted to see the fun."

"Did you see it?"

"In a measure."

"I suppose you are going around to tell every one that I set the house on fire?"

"At present, I have no such intention; it is none of my business, and I rather admire the way in which you made your bold play. Your cards were out-ranked, but you stand as a fearless gamester."

"Murdock, this is the second serious accusation you have made against me."

"Yes?"

"Once, you accused me of doing harm to Lemuel Holly. What led you into a belief so absurd?"

"The fact that you killed Holly," was the blunt reply.

"Did you see it done?"

"No."

"Then how do you know it?"

"Another man saw you. I am the hearer of his story, and no more. Your record is not a very savory one at Jacob's Ladder, Francis, and enough of it is public to make matters unpleasant for you."

"And you exult over it!" huskily commented Francis.

"Wrong! I am out of it all now. Whatever may have been the case weeks ago, I am only an idle on-looker at present. The fact is, the retribution of time has you in its grasp; the Hights, ignoble and despicable as they are, are the agents of fate; and you are paying dearly for your misdeeds."

"Your imagination runs riot."

"Wait until the dawn of day. You are a fallen statue, if not a fallen idol, in this town. People believe you tried to murder your wife in order to enjoy Vencila, and they will make you feel the weight of their resentment."

"Perhaps you started the idea?"

"You did it yourself, when you embraced and kissed Vencila in public, and called her your 'darling.'"

"Curse you! do not refer to that!" Francis cried, madly.

"I only mention what you may expect."

"Perhaps you think my enemies will have things all their own way? Perhaps you think I shall sit like a chastised dog and submit to all they see fit to put upon me? You never made a greater mistake; the whole world may have turned against me, but I shall have an iron hand for it, and for my enemies in particular. I defy them all; I'm ready to fight all; and I'll begin now!"

While speaking he had secretly cocked his revolver, and he now drew it quickly, turned the muzzle upon Murdock and pulled the trigger.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE LAST APPEAL.

No report followed. The hammer fell, but the revolver gave forth no sound.

"Spare your labor," directed Gideon, quietly.

"If you will look at the weapon you will find that it contains only empty shells. You left it in your private room when you were sprinkling kerosene to-night, and I took the liberty of fixing it so you could do no damage. In your fight with the Hights I have no part, but I did not know your exact scheme, and thought I might be marked for destruction. You can procure fresh cartridges to-morrow."

Holbrook muttered a few indistinct words, but accepted the explanation without further trial.

"I'll leave you now," the paymaster added.

"You are hardly in an amiable mood, and may want to be alone. Good-night."

Murdock walked away down the trail, but Francis did not answer. Instead, he sat down and remained looking into the chasm. He had attempted a man's life, and there was a chance for that man to return and square the debt, but Holbrook had no fear of it.

He felt that Gideon preferred to have him live.

The late encounter was soon forgotten, and Francis's thoughts went to matters more important to him. What was he to do in the future? He was not a coward, and had no idea of running away, if the people did credit him with one black deed of which he was not guilty: he intended to remain and face them all.

But what of Milly? Out of all the world's population he cared only for her, and she accused him unjustly and refused to see him. He now developed a new side to his nature. Like the lover who kills the girl who will not marry

him, Francis began to entertain dark thoughts against Milly.

"She shall come back to me, or suffer for it!" he muttered, darkly.

Then his anger rose against the Vanes. They had denied him admittance to Milly's room, and now came in for the blame which always rests upon the defender of a wife in matrimonial troubles.

"Let them be careful!" he added. "I'm going to demand my wife within a few hours, and woe be to those who oppose me! I will have fresh cartridges, and it would take but little to make me go on the war-path against all that crew—the Vanes, the Hights, Murdock, and—yes; and Milly!"

With a sudden change of mood the mine-owner flung himself down on the ground again.

"You are better off than I, Lemuel!" he groaned.

He lay there for hours. The stars grew fainter and night grew gray. Slowly the day came until the high peaks were touched by the sunlight. Before hours of labor Holbrook went to his mine and found material for breakfast. Then, from a covert, he watched the townspeople get in motion for the day. He had heard talk there about the possibility of claiming the rank of city, and his own name had been mentioned in connection with the position of mayor. Now, he was watching like a skulking wolf.

When the desired time had arrived, and the business of the day was well under way, he left the hills and went down among the houses. He met several persons, some well-to-do and some poor, but there was a similarity in the conduct of all—some ignored him wholly, and others gave only a slight nod of recognition, but all were as cold as the deep-flowing waters of Babel Run.

Over near the north side of the town smoke still rose from the burned house, but, though it had been a fire of origin supposedly unknown, nobody came to him to ask how he thought it had caught, nor did he go to any one with conjectures.

The ignoring of the subject by every one was striking.

Francis entered the office and found Murdock at his usual post, diligently going over figures, and arranging the books with care.

This man's calmness was irritating to an extreme, and his devotion to business after all that had occurred, was enough to try temper more even than Holbrook's, but, after watching him awhile, the latter walked into the inner room, remained awhile, and then returned.

"How is business, Murdock?" he asked.

"No letters this morning, sir."

"If any come, can you attend to them?"

"If you wish."

"My affairs are unsettled, and other matters may keep me busy a good deal. Some man is needed right here in the office, and you are the only one who knows about affairs at the Bald Eagle. Can you manage while I am away?"

"I will do my best, sir."

Gideon looked his employer full in the eyes, and his manner was as quiet and respectful as if their relations were of the most commonplace kind.

"Murdock," Francis suddenly exclaimed, "I drew a revolver on you, last night, but you are the most decent of the gang about me. If you will be faithful, you shall lose nothing."

"The Bald Eagle property has received my most careful attention since I came here; it will continue to receive it," quietly returned the paymaster.

"There is more decency in you than all the others," repeated Francis, his mind running all in one channel. "They are vampires, who seek my life-blood. But never mind! I am going out now. Here is the key to my private desk. If you need to do it, open the desk for anything you need."

The confusion of ideas and words continued, and it was plain that the mine-owner was not wholly himself, but his manner was by no means disordered. He knew very well what he was about, and, even to Gideon, the strangeness of the trust was impressive.

In his desolation and trouble Holbrook was turning to the man who knew the worst about him as to an only friend.

"Your wishes shall be obeyed, sir," the employee readily, but quietly, answered.

Francis went out. He still ignored his ruined house, but had a fixed purpose in mind, and it became plain when he made his way to Vane's house. But the full current of his thoughts was known only to himself. When he was in the private office he had put fresh cartridges into his revolver, and it was a dangerous visitor who walked unannounced into the Vane sitting-room.

Leonis, alone, was there.

"Good-morning!" he began, very quietly.

She returned the greeting.

"How is Milly?" he continued.

"Nervous and weak, but uninjured."

"Thank Heaven!"

Leonis said nothing.

"Can I see her now?" he asked, humbly.

"Have you forgotten her message?"

"She was excited, then."

There was no answer, and, after a pause, he added:

"Will you kindly tell her I am here, and wish to see her?"

"Yes."

Leonis went at once, and her manner, though not friendly, was so far from being severe that he felt new hope. But she soon returned with a sheet of note-paper, which she gave him with the explanation:

"I have insisted upon having her send her own words in her own writing."

Francis received the paper and read eagerly:

"You have had my answer once, and I see no necessity for repeating it, but will comply, thus far, with your wishes. Last night you deliberately set fire to the house—I know it as well as if I had proof—with the hope that you could end my life and enable you to marry Vencila. You started with me in your arms so that I could have no chance to save myself, and then flung me into the fire to die. I realized this as I was falling. That fall stunned me, and I should have perished only for the help of another person."

"You see that I understand your horrible plot fully. You have tried to make me believe black was white, and when I accused you of loving that woman, you always denied it stoutly. At last I have proof, and denials will not deceive me."

"Go to Vencila! You and she can unite your fortunes, and I will never molest you. I don't want your companionship."

"Don't ask to see me! It is useless. I repeat what I have before said—I will never again look upon your face unless it is in a court of law."

"Milly."

Francis finished, and raised his gaze to Leonis's face.

"If I could see my wife, I could convince her of the error she labors under."

"She says she will not see you."

"Why should she do that? Why should any person refuse to listen to friendly argument?"

"I only know Milly refuses. Do not understand that I am arguing against you, Mr. Holbrook, for I am not, I only bear her message."

"She wrongs me!" he cried, with sudden fierceness.

"Can you prove that?"

"I can convince her, if she will see me."

"By what witnesses?"

"What right have you to question me so unfeelingly?" was the sharp inquiry.

"Understand me, I do not question you thus,"

Leonis answered, gently. "I am deeply pained by the situation, and can hardly realize you and Milly are estranged. When I considered the past it seems as if there must be some mistake, and that you are as devoted as ever to her."

"I love her!—I love her!" Holbrook declared, with impetuous emphasis. "I tell you I never cared for any other woman, and have made sacrifices for her of which she knows nothing. There is no sacrifice I would not make now. Let her but say the word and I will—

sell the Bald Eagle secretly for what it will bring, and as secretly leave town and go where the Hights will never see us again. Go to her and tell her this! Beseech her to have mercy on a man almost maddened, whose only crime has been his love for her! Life is worth nothing to me without her—go and tell her I will have her back or die! No, no! don't say that; but implore her to come and listen to a man who, deep in trouble already, is almost maddened by her refusal. Tell her, and I will bless you!"

He was on his feet, and fierce and dramatic gestures added force to the words which poured so fast from his lips. It was a strong, almost frantic appeal.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE HEAVY HAND OF THE HUNTER.

LEONIS did not bear this impetuous speech without being affected. Francis's whole manner was that of one who was speaking from his heart, as it were, and she felt inclined to believe his assertions.

She had never approved of that hasty marriage. She had been well aware that Milly had no special affection for Holbrook, and this, to the more honorable Leonis, was reason enough why there should be no marriage, but the precipitation with which it was made, so soon after Holly's death, shocked her.

Knowing that selfishness and indolence alone had actuated Milly, the affair had nearly caused a rupture of the friendly relations between the girls; but, having decided to make the best of a bad matter, Leonis had kept up the intimacy with her usual strong loyalty.

Having never doubted Francis's love for his wife, Leonis found it hard, now, to believe he had tried to kill her.

"I will take your message to Milly," she said, simply but earnestly.

"Heaven bless you!" uttered the mine-owner.

Leonis went as indicated. Milly was in bed, but gave no perceptible evidence of the night's troubles. She was weak and nervous, but not really ill. Leonis told as near as possible just what Francis had said, and dwelt upon his manner, but that counterfeit likeness of firmness which exists in nearly all weak natures like Milly's, and is so hard to deal with because, even in a plain case, it is deaf to reason, was visible in Milly's compressed lips as she listened. When

her turn came to speak, she answered in five words:

"I will not see him!"

"But don't you think it best?" Leonis urged.

"No!"

"Surely, it can do no harm."

"I won't look on his face!" was the bitter assertion.

"I think you are wrong in this."

"So you side with Vencila Haight!"

"Milly, you do me injustice; you know I don't side with her. Now, I only advise you according to what I think is for your own good. It can do no harm to see him, and it may do good."

"I won't see him!"

Milly was as sharp and ungracious as if Leonis was the offender, and the latter gave up.

"Write your verdict, then."

Impatiently Milly reached for paper and pencil, and, this time, wrote a single line:

"I will not see you!"

Leonis carried it to Francis. He read. His face grew pale, and a new light appeared in his eyes.

"This woman don't know everything; she will see me, and that too, at once!"

He started for the inner room, and, when Leonis would have kept him back, pushed her out of the way roughly. With long, heavy steps, he invaded Milly's room. She looked up, and there was something in his eyes which startled her. She rose to her elbow.

"Leonis!" she cried, in alarm.

"Leonis is not wanted!" fiercely retorted the mine-owner; "you and I can settle this ourselves. You have seen that words can't keep me away; you shall yet learn that doors and locks are equally powerless. You are my wife, and I demand that you return to me. Appeals have proved vain; now I command you to come. What is your answer?"

He had seized her arm in a grasp which was painful, and his passion-distorted face and savage tones frightened her more than ever.

"Help! help!" she gasped—a husky cry.

"We need no help, and I'll kill whoever interferes! Yes; and I'll kill you, unless you agree to return to me. I've sold my soul for you, and no one else shall enjoy the reward of my crime. You shall come back to me or die. Which shall it be? What is your answer?"

He had drawn the revolver, and the muzzle was close to her face. She screamed and struggled in his grasp, and her fears were well founded; he was making no vain threats, and death was by her side.

Leonis was not to be seen.

"Help! help!" Milly cried, again.

"Will you come back?"

"Help!"

"Fool! you will have the whole town here, and I will not be captured until my enemies are dead. Be still! I give you warning that you are tempting fate. Be still or I will shoot!"

Milly cried out again, and the maddened man pressed the trigger. He was only carrying out a pre-arranged plan, for he had decided to have her back or kill her; but the shot did not take effect. His arm was seized and the revolver turned aside just in time; the bullet passed close to Milly's face and buried itself in the wall.

An instant later Francis fell heavily to the floor, flung there by a powerful arm. He sprang up as soon as possible, furious with anger and bent on further mischief, but his hopes received a severe shock as he saw North-land Nick standing in the way like a rock.

"Be still, critter!" the veteran cautioned, in an even voice, "or you'll git thrashed like sin!"

"How dare you interfere here?" Francis shouted.

"Dare! Land love yer! thar ain't no dare erbout it."

"That woman is my wife."

"I noticed yer affectionate way!"

"It is none of your business. Out of the way, or—"

The mine-owner paused and glanced at the bed. Milly had fainted, and the revolver lay beside her on the spread.

"Spit it out, critter!" Nick advised. "Ef you hev any bile ter heave up, let her gurgle!"

"Leave this room!"

"I ain't no idee o' takin' it away."

"Go out, or I'll throw you out!"

"You will? You? Why, Lord love ye, you poor, mean, little insignificant critter, you couldn't throw one end o' my shin-bone out, but you kinder spur up my own ideas. A man—biped who shoots at women—bipeds ain't wanted hyer, an' you kin trot. I'm guardeen o' the woman-critters who camp hyer an' I'll be condemned ef we'll hev any sech high-jinks. You git!"

The hunter started toward Francis as he spoke, but, though his huge form loomed well above the younger man, the latter's courage did not desert him.

He first dodged in an attempt to pass Nick, get at Milly and finish his work, but, being foiled, struck at his captor and would not cease his efforts until he had literally been kicked out of the house.

"Now, you gallop!" Nick ordered. "You harg around hyer any more, an' I'll come out an' wipe all the mud up with yer!"

Holbrook made no reply. Disarmed and physically unable to compete with the hunter, he was wise enough to realize that he would get into jail if he persisted in forcing hostilities.

Nick turned to Leonis.

"The ol' man happened in jest the right time," he observed. "Take it yer father is away."

"He is."

"Wal, I ain't, and I don't mean ter be. I've allays said I'm your guardeen, an' so I be. Mister Man, yender, is on the rampage, an' he's liable ter ante up ag'in with brimstone on his toe-nails. The ol' man will sot right down hyer an' watch the camp, Cherry Cheeks!"

In the mean while Francis was walking away rapidly. For the time being he must give up all thoughts of getting at Milly, though he did not waver in his resolution to carry out the murderous intention which was now in his mind, but he was anxious most of all to get to a place where he would be alone. Well aware that sleep was necessary to keep up his strength, he determined, since he was now homeless, to go to the hotel.

He entered the building, walked to the desk and mechanically took a pen to register, but, as he did so, the names of Vencila and Matthias Haight met his gaze on the page. He dropped the pen.

"Are those persons here?" he asked, turning his bloodshot eyes upon the landlord.

"Yes."

"I'll give you a hundred dollars to order them out!"

"Can't do it."

"Five hundred!"

"No, sir."

"I won't stay in the same building with them."

"Mr. Holbrook, I may as well speak plain and tell you that I don't want your custom. I have no room for you!"

Francis flung a bitter retort back, and stalked angrily out of the hotel. A few yards away was the house of a rich man who had been Holbrook's associate in business and social ways ever since the Bald Eagle began to pay. The latter went to the door and asked for a bed in which to lie down and sleep.

"You'll excuse me, Holbrook," was the frigid reply, "but I can't take you in!"

The door closed in Francis's face, but, this time, he had nothing to say. Selecting those he had deemed his best friends in the past, he went to two more private houses, only to meet with the same experience; no one would have him under his roof.

The mine-owner tried no more, but walked phlegmatically out of the town. No one had a chance then to refuse recognition; Francis looked straight ahead with eyes which saw no one, and was unconscious of the gaze of olden friend or foe.

Up the hillside he went, taking the well-known trail, and only paused when he stood at the top of the cliff, where Lemuel Holly had stood for the last time in life. Francis looked down for awhile to where the waters of Babel Run raced and foamed, and then turned and gazed at the houses of Jacob's Ladder.

A loud, harsh laugh passed his lips.

"I'm worth one-eighth part of a million!" he cried, "yet there is no one in town so mean as to do me honor; no house so vile but that my presence would contaminate it. Ha! ha! ha!"

It was a wild laugh, yet there was something in the situation which appealed to his sense of grotesque, if not natural, humor.

"Homeless, houseless, despised!" he added. "So be it; the mountains are free to all, and I will find a place where I can, at least, lie down and sleep. Peaceful will be that slumber, for I am a happy man. Ha! ha!"

He walked on up the trail.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE STRANGEST CHANCE OF ALL.

ABOVE the cliff Babel Run grew shallow rapidly, and Francis was soon able to cross without trouble. To the south lay a region where, without walking far, he could get to a place where he was not likely to be happened upon by any one, which was what he desired.

He had gone what seemed far enough when the earth suddenly caved in under his feet and he went down. He caught at a bush, but delayed the fall only a moment, and then descended a dozen feet.

He alighted on earth and was not injured, but looking up, saw a sort of shaft which looked capable of defying his efforts as a climber.

On one side was a passage, or corridor, and he walked through it for a dozen feet. Then he emerged into a fairly well-lighted cave. There was an opening at one side, and, when he investigated, he found it like a window in a vast building. It was in the face of a sheer cliff which descended two hundred feet, and rose half as high above him. No one could come in, or go out, by this opening, and, well satisfied, Francis sighed and lay down.

Too weary to give thought to his troubles he fell asleep almost at once, and two hours of slumber followed. His rest had not grown

broken when he awoke, and he wondered why he had aroused. A dim suspicion that it was due to some unusual cause made him rise to his elbow, and then a peculiar sound reached him.

It was like a human groan.

At first he could not believe he had heard aright, but when it had been repeated twice the fact became certain that some one else was in the cave with him. He rose and went toward the quarter from which the groans sounded.

"Who is there?" he asked.

Not until he had repeated the inquiry was there any answer, and then a faint voice echoed his own words:

"Who is there?"

"I'm a man like yourself," Francis explained. "Who are you? Are you hurt?"

"I'm dying!"

"What's the trouble?"

"Sickness and death. I used to think I did not care for them, but weakness takes away pride and will. If you are a Christian, get the lamp and make a light; I want to look upon a human face again."

Holbrook did not know where the lamp was, and the stranger's mind proved too shattered to direct his search, but he found it at last, and soon had the light. He was surprised to find that a recess of the cave, which was some thirty feet square, was furnished like a regular room. On a bed at one side lay a gaunt, gray old man, whose appearance seemed to confirm his own assertion that he was desperately ill.

"I can't see you," added this person. "Sight seems to have deserted me."

"What can I do for you?" Francis asked.

"Get me water."

After some search the mine-owner found a rivulet in another part of the cave, and the sick man drank eagerly.

"That's new life!" he exclaimed.

"How came you in this place?" Francis inquired.

"I live here."

"Alone?"

"Yes; I am a hermit, to use the common term. I have found men base and false, so I live here."

"You estimate mankind well. Who are you, if I may ask?"

"My name is James Sunderland, but they call me Shaggy Jim at the town."

"I remember seeing you, now. So you have fallen ill, with no one to care for you?"

"Yes."

"Rest easy; I'll do it."

"I will not leave here!" was the hurried declaration.

"You need not; I'll stay with you."

"Give me yonder bottle."

The hermit swallowed a spoonful of what seemed to be, and was, medicine, and then settled back with such indications of a desire to sleep that Francis did not worry him with more questions then. He had grown interested in this recluse who had found mankind so ungrateful.

"If his experience has been as wretched as mine, I pity him!" Holbrook muttered, bitterly.

Shaggy Jim slept. His companion waited until his manner indicated that he would not be aroused easily, and then took the lamp to look the cave over. The main part proved to be two hundred feet long and about eighty wide. There seemed to be no exit except the hole in the impassable cliff, but closer search revealed the fact that the hermit had come and gone through the passage by which Francis himself had first entered, though the precise point of exit had lately been walled up.

Returning to the recess, the explorer found evidence of a regular system of housekeeping, long continued. Shaggy Jim had enjoyed no luxuries, but comfort had been his in days past.

There was an abundance of food, evidently purchased at Jacob's Ladder, a very comfortable chair which the hermit had himself made, a chest of medicines, and many other things.

What he had endured since being taken ill, Francis could vaguely surmise. Foreseeing that he would be unable to get to the running water, Jim had brought a filled cask to the recess, but had drawn from it until the supply was nearly gone and far from fresh.

More than this, he had been unable to use the various articles of food he possessed to make dishes fit for a sick man, and when the new-comer had investigated fully, he decided that Sunderland needed a nurse more than a doctor.

He gave no signs of impending collapse, though it was strange he was alive at all.

Francis looked at the worn, aged face, and the interest he had felt from the first grew stronger and stronger. Himself exiled from among his fellow-men, and smarting under many rebuffs and keen, though merited, discomfiture, he was drawn toward the other sufferer with singular power.

"Providence has thrown me into his company," he mused, "and I will not neglect the chance to help him. Who knows but what I, with all my money, may yet become a dweller in a hole of the earth more wretched than this? Old man, who ruined you? What trusted friend, or loved one, betrayed you? What did you do for revenge?—but let me not think of

this now. Of all the people in the world, only this bony old man thinks of me with kindness, and he is dying. Dying? No; he has food and medicine, and I will care for him, nurse him back to health. I'll watch over him as if he were my brother!"

It was a romantic idea, but Francis, like the homeless cur that vibrates its tail and looks covertly at man, mutely beseeching kindness yet ready to flee from fresh indignities, was in a mood to seize upon any chance.

He became feverishly anxious to save the old man.

Anon his thoughts returned to those at Jacob's Ladder, and he cursed them all and swore to be revenged.

"They may think I can't sleep in town, and I won't try to deceive them yet. I'll stay here, and they may imagine I have run away. So much the better; I'll have a chance to plot, and to execute my plots. So, Milly, you scorn and hate me? Good! my own love has turned to gall, and I only wish to be avenged on you. Strange that one so weak should so turn against me. Can she have been influenced by some one?"

This suspicion once at work in his mind was bound to take more definite form, but it went wide of the mark.

"Who should it be but Leonis? They were always friends, and Leonis has double the boldness, energy and brains that Milly has. Yes, that's it; Leonis has influenced her against me, and all this is due to Vane's daughter, curse her!"

His vindictive anger rose higher as he brooded over this supposed discovery.

"Leonis shall repent it!" he declared. "All my hopes of the future are swept away—except the hope of revenge! I'll be square with those who have ruined me; I'll hang for one of them, but, before that day, I'll make a weeding out among them. Whom do I want to kill?"

He counted on his fingers.

"Milly, one; Leonis, two; Vencila, three—it's strange how, when a man finds himself ruined, he can always trace it to women—Matthias Haight, four. What of Murdock? He knows enough to hang me, but is the most decent of the lot, and perhaps I won't harm him. The others shall die!"

Shaggy Jim aroused, and Francis renewed his duties as nurse. Jim had been without many things which were close at hand, simply because he lacked strength to get or compound them, but, under his direction, the new-comer now did all. Medicines were given, and light, nourishing articles of food prepared.

Physical weakness had lessened Sunderland's desire to ignore all of his species, and he was duly and sincerely grateful.

"You are a good fellow!" he declared, in a voice which, certainly, was gaining strength.

"What's your name?"

Francis hesitated only for a moment.

"Ara Dow," he then answered.

"Do you live at Jacob's Ladder?"

"No."

"I'm afraid I can never reward you for your goodness to me. I am poor."

"So much the better!" Francis asserted, quickly. "I, too, know what misfortune is, and another person in trouble appeals to me powerfully. With your permission I'll stay right here, old man, and nurse you back to health!"

"Won't it interfere with your business?"

"Not a bit. What if it does? I tell you, I hate mankind, and all I can do for you shall be done gladly. Fate has been all against me, but here, there is no sham and no hypocrisy. How is it? May I nurse you back to life?"

Shaggy Jim put out his hand feebly. Francis understood the mute reply, and their palms crossed and sealed the compact.

It was a strange link in the chain of strange retribution. Just when Holbrook thought he was most free from danger he was voluntarily becoming nurse to the only man who could prove that he had murdered Lemuel Holly!

By saving his life Francis might lose his own.

CHAPTER XXXII.

SEEKING REVENGE.

THE day passed as other days had passed at Jacob's Ladder, but the familiar face and form of Francis Holbrook met no one's gaze on the street. Gideon Murdock sat in the office and attended to business as usual.

He could not but be impressed with the situation. He had come to the mountain town as Holbrook's enemy, yet, in the hour when the latter's star was hopelessly fallen, Gideon practically stood between him and financial ruin.

The workers in the Bald Eagle Mine held a consultation and notified the superintendent that they would not work until satisfied they would get their wages. The superintendent went to the office. He found Murdock at the desk, and business had never seemed more systematic or brisk.

"Tell the men I will pay them for each day's labor at the hour of leaving work," he answered, unhesitatingly.

The superintendent returned to the mine, and the strikers resumed work at once.

"We can trust Murdock!" was the general verdict.

Just why they believed he was to be trusted so implicitly no one explained, but his prompt action had restored confidence, and, after that, he had all the miners at his back.

It was much the same with business men. Nearly all were more or less concerned in the Bald Eagle's affairs, for Holbrook had reached out widely and skillfully, and made the success of his business a financial object to all. These men called at the office, anxious about their interests, but they had never been more favorably impressed. Gideon was not only systematic, but, as if by accident, he continued to display the funds in the safe, and the visitors went home satisfied.

Thus, the paymaster stood between the conflicting elements through the day, and the sun went down with the Bald Eagle as firm as ever in the market.

During the day Milly had seen the doctor twice, for the attempt on her life had been a trial as severe as the fire. When she recovered from the swoon in which Francis left her it was to be in a highly nervous state, and all of Leonis's skill was necessary to keep her in anything like a reasonable mood.

The bullet-hole in the wall told forcibly of Holbrook's murderous attempt, but, though Leonis often looked at it and shivered, it was not made a public affair.

Every moment she expected Leonis would demand her husband's arrest, but neither she nor any one else suggested the step. She was anxious to be revenged, but she *dared* not anger him further.

It was well the people did not know of the shooting, for, with the Hights near at hand, the good name of the town might have been marred by some rash act. It was Leonis's idea to keep Francis's latest step secret, and no one opposed her. North-land Nick remained in the house to guard any one who might need his aid, but, always having been accustomed to fight his own battles, he did not now consider it in the line of common usage to arrest Holbrook.

Milly was very thoughtful during a part of the afternoon, and she finally turned to Leonis suddenly.

"I want to see Mr. Blackden," she remarked.

"Why?"

"Never mind; send for him."

"Is it on business?"

"What's that to you?" Milly returned irritably. "Just send for him, and say no more about it."

Leonis overlooked the ungracious manner which seemed to be her only reward for helping Milly so much, and Blackden was summoned. He was one of the foremost business men of the town, high tempered and impetuous, but of influence second to no one there. He came, and, at Milly's request, was left alone with her.

"What do people say about my affairs?" she asked, abruptly, after a few preliminaries.

"You have the strongest sympathy of all," Blackden responded.

"They think I have been wronged?"

"Think! Why, they know it!"

"I have lost all."

"No, no; you have friends in abundance—we are all with you, by Jupiter!"

"My house is gone."

"That's true."

"And my husband."

"Small loss, that!"

"What of the woman who stole him?"

"She is a female fiend!"

"Is she still at the hotel?"

"Yes; and Holbrook tried to get quarters there, too, so as to be near her; but the landlord wouldn't have him."

"But she is living in comfort?"

"Well, yes."

"Is that right?"

"No, by Jupiter!"

"Will the people allow it?"

"I've heard some say the Hights ought to be tarred and feathered, and, by Jupiter, the idea is good!"

Milly had sounded Blackden to her satisfaction, and now came directly to the point.

"I don't care to have that done, but my wrongs demand some redress. I think the people will not do right if they allow the Hights to remain here. They contaminate the air. I can't breathe freely near them. I am an honorable woman who never did any one harm, and of whom no one can say ill. I have been patient, faithful and unselfish in all affairs of life, and if I have not appeared as a public benefactor, it is because I have been too busy. A woman's proper sphere is at home, and there I have slaved all my days. I don't want to boast, but any woman in town would do well to pattern after me! I have always had the good of Jacob's Ladder at heart, and its citizens owe me much. Now, after all I've done, I'm robbed of my home and husband by a wretched creature. What are the people going to do about it?"

Blackden had never suspected that Milly possessed one-third of the noble qualities she now claimed so boldly, but he was too chivalrous to mention the fact, or even admit it to himself, then.

"By Jupiter! we'll do whatever you say!" he declared.

"I want the Hights to leave town!"

"They shall go."

"I want them *ordered* out, at once!"

"It shall be done."

"By a body of representative citizens?"

"Yes."

"At once?"

"This instant!"

Blackden's date was recklessly given, but his intentions were of the best. He sprang up, ready to go, but Milly stopped him to hear her plan more fully. She wished a committee to wait upon the Hights and, ignoring all forms of law, order them away; she wanted it composed of just seven selected public men; and she desired the town's clergyman to lead the committee.

Blackden heard and promised to obey; he went about the work at once.

He had felt some doubt in regard to the clergyman, but all went well. The good preacher was as near the point of wrath as one of his cloth could well go. He had formerly enjoyed himself greatly, if not after the way of the world and the flesh, by looking down from his pulpit Sunday afternoons to see sleek Francis drop golden coins into the contribution-box, and the havoc the Hights had wrought stirred him deeply.

Yes; he thought it wise to order them away, and he did not hesitate to head the party. They were soon at the hotel, and in the presence of the objects of indignation; and the clergyman presented the case in well-chosen, eloquent words.

Matthias listened with a cold, sneering smile, while Vencila fanned herself and smiled even more broadly.

"In conclusion," remarked the Rev. Mr. George, "it is our opinion that you must leave town."

"Suppose we refuse to go?" questioned the old lawyer.

"Then we shall make you!"

"Do you know of any law—"

"This is not a matter of law!" Blackden interrupted. "We don't care a rap for law. We run this town, and won't have objectionable parties here."

"You intend to ignore law, and try to force us to go."

"Try! That ain't the word; you've got to go."

"I fail to comprehend what the charge is against us, gentlemen," asserted Matthias, calm as ever.

"That girl stole Milly Holbrook's husband!"

Speaking with indignant warmth, Blackden pointed to Vencila, whereupon, that young woman laughed aloud.

"Oh! I reckon not," Hight returned.

"We don't care a cuss what you reckon!" shouted Blackden, forgetting that the minister was present. "You and your niece have raised hades here, but your race is run. We give you until twilight to get out of town, and if you don't go as ordered, you'll go out on a mule, with tar and feathers on you!"

"Do you know I should bring suit against you?"

"We don't care. We won't have disreputable parties in town; hence, we won't have you. We give you the indicated time to skip; if you don't go, you'll hear from us again!"

Blackden rose, and the other members of the committee followed his example, but Matthias coolly directed:

"Sit down, gentlemen! You have given your side of the case; now hear ours."

"We don't care to; your side don't interest us."

"It interests you deeply. Parson George, you are ostensibly a disciple of peace and justice, and as such, ought to be willing to hear defense as well as accusation. Will you examine this document?"

The speaker had taken a folded paper from his pocket; he now deftly spread it out before the person addressed.

"Read!" he added.

The clergyman obeyed, and, after a moment, a look of surprise and bewilderment overspread his face.

"What is this?" he murmured, in confusion.

Matthias allowed his cold half-smile to appear.

"It is a marriage-certificate," he answered, "and proves that the young lady known as Vencila Hight is, really, Francis Holbrook's only legal wife!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE HIGHTS WIN A POINT.

THERE was brief silence, and then Blackden pounded the table with his fist.

"I don't believe it!" he shouted.

"Look for yourself!" Matthias returned.

"You will find by yonder certificate that Francis Holbrook and Vencila Hight were married years ago, before the woman Milly ever saw him, and before he ever came to Jacob's Ladder. The marriage was strictly legal, which can't be said of the union between Holbrook and Milly."

The latter's claim on Holbrook is not worth a straw; Vencila is the only legal wife!"

Blackden turned to Rev. Mr. George.

"Is that a genuine certificate?" he asked.

"Yes," was the faint answer.

"Then it is a forgery; it was filled in by some body besides a minister."

"Unfortunately," George confessed, "I know the reverend gentleman whose name is attached to this, and am compelled to admit it is his own writing. He was my class-mate, and, much as I regret to say it, I can swear to his writing!"

"And the certificate is regular?" Matthias asked, as much unmoved as ever.

"Yes."

"Then, I do not think you gentlemen will press the claim that Vencila has stolen Milly's husband. The shoe is on the other foot!"

The committee were aghast. They would have refused to believe, but one of their number, a man in whom they had full confidence, had given a verdict they could not dispute, and there was no argument.

"This is horrible!" George declared.

"Instead of blaming us," pursued Matthias, coolly, "you should give us credit for most generous motives. In order to spare pain to the illegal wife, my wronged niece consented to endure a subordinate position in Holbrook's house, and this she did, exposed day by day to insults from that Milly such as only a jealous woman can bestow upon her rival. Having endured so much already, we refuse to leave town and give our enemies possession of what is ours."

"We retract all we have said, sir," the minister hastened to answer.

"And we are not ordered away?"

"Certainly not!"

Some of the other members of the committee thought the reverend gentleman hasty in answering for them without consultation, but they were too much demoralized to object.

With a perfect unanimity of opinion they left the room, and the Hights were in full command of the field.

"The first victory is won," evenly observed the old attorney, "and the second shall follow. We have just time to put the machinery of the law in operation, and get a grip on the Holbrook property before the day ends."

In the meanwhile, Milly was waiting for news from the seat of war. Blackden had promised to make early report, but he did not come. Urged on by Milly, Leonis often went to the window to look for the agent and it was thus that she heard from an idle gossip the news that Blackden lacked the courage to bring.

"You have heard something!" Milly exclaimed, when Leonis re-entered her room.

"I have not seen Mr. Blackden."

"Whom, then?"

"None of the committee."

"What are you keeping back? Are you against me, like all the rest?" Milly asked, fretfully.

"I have only heard a rumor, and such things amount to nothing."

"What was it?"

Leonis tried to avoid answering, but Milly was not to be quieted. Her temper rose and her companion finally yielded to necessity.

"The story is being told on the street that when the committee called on the Hights they were confronted with irrefragable proof that Francis and Vencila were married years ago, and that she is his legal wife."

Leonis made the statement reluctantly, dreading the effect upon Milly, but the view of it which was uppermost in the former's mind did not occur then to the latter.

"So that villain is a bigamist!" she exclaimed. "I always knew he was a vile wretch and this only emphasizes the fact. I presume he has half a dozen wives. I hope there were some ahead of Vencila."

Leonis was silent.

"No wonder he had the temerity to bring her into the house; she was his wife, and he knew he could do as he pleased, and he hated me so that he was bound to humiliate me all he could."

"Milly, if this rumor is true, it occurs to me, remembering all that has happened lately, that Francis was trying not to humiliate but to shield you. Probably he hoped to get the Hights away, and save you from knowing the unpleasant facts."

"Do you stoop to defend a murderer?"

"I defend no one."

"You are against me, like every one else!" cried Milly, whose supreme selfishness rendered her incapable of reason or gratitude.

Assuming a dictatorial manner, soon after, she ordered a messenger sent to Blackden, who most unwillingly appeared on the scene. He confirmed the rumor, and gave additional information.

"As soon as we left old Hight he moved legally, and proceeded to put an attachment on the Holbrook property, in Vencila's name, to secure her rights."

"Has that woman got all the property?" cried Milly, furiously.

"Not yet, and there promises to be a legal fight before she will; things are woefully mixed

up. The case is rendered all the more perplexing by the fact that, when old Haight moved, he found some one else had been just half an hour ahead of him, and clapped on an injunction forbidding the paying out any money whatever. Who do you suppose did that?"

"I don't know."

"The heirs of Lemuel Holly."

"What have they to do with it?" was the sharp inquiry.

"I presume the law will answer that question. The movement is made for Warren Holly, brother of Lemuel."

"He had better mind his own business."

"Did you ever hear of him before?"

"Yes."

"His complaint charges that, when Lemuel died, you deliberately tried to cheat him out of his share of the property."

"It was not worth a decent living—does he think I would be fool enough to give away what there was?"

"It has become valuable."

"That was my good luck."

"Do you know the law gives a widow only one-third of a deceased man's property?"

"There was no property in this case. The Bald Eagle would not have sold for five hundred dollars then."

"If so, why didn't you notify Warren Holly of his brother's death? He didn't know it for months."

"What right have you to question?" Milly sharply inquired.

"The fact is," Blackden bluntly responded, "I've about decided that the whole gang in this case is as bad as it can be. Warren Holly, in his complaint, says he is a brother of poor Lemuel, and, consequently, heir to two-thirds of all Lemuel left; that you knew his address but failed to inform him of Lemuel's death; and that he has never had a penny from the Bald Eagle, though it is now worth one-eighth of a million. Madam, I've been a miner, myself. I've swung the pick in lonely gulches, working like a slave, and in danger from wild animals and wild men, and if I'd died there, I would have blessed the man who would bury my bones and let my blood-relatives know. Lemuel Holly died a miner, yet his widow, because of the money to be had from the mine, never informed his brother of it. I say, palsied be the hand that is lifted against a miner, and cursed be the person who looks on a miner as a dog whose death is not worth reporting!"

Milly was startled by this change in one who had so lately been her sympathizer. She could not find words to reply at once, and when she did, it was only to make a bad matter worse.

Slight occurrences often produce great changes, and Blackden had given no imaginative reasons. As a sailor knows the hardships of a sailor, so Blackden knew those of a miner, and the double wrong to Lemuel appealed to his strongest feelings.

"Is Warren Holly here?" Milly asked, anon.

"No."

"How has he made this move, then?"

"Through an agent."

"Who?"

"Don't know. He has a lawyer, but the lawyer won't say who employed him. It was a sudden move of some one right here who saw danger and moved just in time. I'm glad of it, for he got ahead of the Haight, and no selfish person will get a hack at the property until the law makes a decision."

Blackden took his departure.

"Leonis, the whole world is against me!" cried Milly.

"Is it true that you did not notify the brother of Lemuel's death?" was the grave reply.

"Yes."

"How could you do that?"

"The mine wasn't paying well enough to support me decently."

"Did you write as soon as the new vein was found?"

"No; but I always meant to when I had time, and Warren Holly soon found out Lemuel was dead."

"Oh! Milly, I did not think you were so selfish!" exclaimed Leonis.

"That's it; you are against me, like every one else!" the weak woman complained, bitterly. "Everybody thinks I am only a dog, to be misused at will!"

And Milly broke in tears and sobs.

Leonis did not answer. She had never been blind to Milly's faults, but she was learning that they had been greater than she suspected. The selfish woman had sunk low in her estimation, and not the less so because she had not given a thought to her position if Vencila was Holbrook's legal wife.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE VAGABOND PAIR AND THEIR WORK.

Two days later, Francis Holbrook was with Shaggy Jim in the cave.

"You are better, old friend!" remarked Francis.

"I am; that's sure," Jim admitted.

"Your medicine must be just suited to your case."

"It ain't that!" declared the hermit; "it's

the good care you have given me. A mother couldn't care for her sick child any better than you have for me. I never have seen the like of it; 'twas not according to the way of the world."

"Old man, don't be surprised," Francis answered. "You and I know what the world is. You never took to the life of a hermit without some great wrong being done you. Well, I, too, have tasted of the ingratitude of the human kind, and been betrayed bitterly. We ought to be drawn one to the other, you and I."

"Your injury must be recent," observed Shaggy Jim, looking curiously at his companion.

"It is."

"Do you intend to become a hermit?"

"Not until I've had revenge!"

The old man sighed.

"Better put your mind from such things, or you will live to repent it. Vengeance is mine, and I will repay," saith the Lord. Man should not let his passions go unbridled, and injure one of his kind. With mine own eyes I have seen deeds of darkness, and what I remember makes me shiver. Put away revengeful thoughts, and you will be a happier man."

"I'll think of it!"

With this abrupt answer Francis walked to the opening in the cliff and looked out. Darkness was falling, and he intended to leave the cave and wander under the open sky, something he had not done since he first found the old hermit. Not once had he left Jim's side.

There was really no good reason why he should exile himself from Jacob's Ladder, as he well knew. He was rich, and a little cunning work would, no doubt, put him again in favor with a part of the citizens. He had the wit and the courage to do this, but the trouble with Milly had literally paralyzed his energies.

Instead of making a bold fight to win in open field, his sole ambition was to be revenged, and, while caring for Shaggy Jim, he had all the time been brooding over his troubles and meditating revenge.

To get revenge he was willing to sacrifice riches, worldly position, safety—all!

Leaving the hole in the cliff, he returned to the hermit and prepared his supper. A professional nurse could not have been much more skillful, and, certainly, not so sympathetic. Bitter, and disgusted with mankind, he turned to the bony old man and lavished sympathy galore upon him.

Thus far Jim's dimmed vision had kept him from recognizing his new friend, and the deadly secret of Babel Run hovered between them without either suspecting it.

After supper Francis left the cave. Unblocking the exterior opening of the passage he went out and then, making a detour to the left, passed over the upper and most shallow part of Babel Run, went by the eastern side of the Bald Eagle Mine, and thus reached the high land which afforded the best view of the town.

It was as quiet as ever, and little was to be seen except the twinkling lights of the house.

The sight aroused his passions still higher. Whenever one is leaving a place it is a matter of half-bitter thought that when he is gone the town and its people will move on as of old, and that his own departure will make no perceptible difference with those who remain, but when one goes as an exile, with all his former friends against him, there is no weak medium about the bitterness of his feelings.

Francis watched for a while, and then broke into fierce words:

"My curse rest upon all there!" he cried, fiercely. "May an earthquake come, and swallow all of them in the heart of the globe!"

"Hyer's yer patent 'arthquakes!" quietly remarked a voice behind the former speaker.

Francis turned quickly, and saw two stout men whom he did not recognize at first.

"Why in perdition are you sneaking around here?" he inquired angrily.

"We ain't a-sneakin'."

"Get out!"

"Now, hol' on, general! Why should yer use ol' friends sech a way?"

"Who are you?"

"Perk Honey an' Cale Shaw, yer Honor."

"Oh!"

"We was hired by you ter do a little job awhile ago, an', hearin' you whoopin' 'er up so savagerous, it sorter struck me you might hire us ag'in."

"You made a botch of the other job?"

"We took Murdock out all right, an' intended ter bury him in the gulch as you advised, but we didn't know he was chain-lightnin'. Nary!"

"Where have you been, lately?"

"We hev a cave over nor'west in the hills."

Francis surveyed the pair of vagabonds thoughtfully. As he had said they made a complete failure of the attempt to dispose of Murdock, but, in a certain way, they had a good deal of cunning, while of rascality they had a stock not likely ever to run out.

He questioned them further about their cave, and, finding their replies satisfactory, finally asked abruptly:

"Do you want another job?"

"You bet!" declared Honey.

"To abduct a woman?"

"Nothin' more agreeabler."

"You know where old Vane lives?"

"Cert."

"In that house there lives, just now, a woman who, to be precise, is my wife. Can you kidnap her, and take her to your cave?"

Perk hesitated for a moment.

"Ef anybody kin do it, we kin. Anyhow, we're ready ter try, but it ain't safe ter promise, dead sure. We hear things is all ripped up the back at the Ladder, an' we may find a feelanx o' baggonets prickin' our noses when we put our side-whiskers over the winder-sill."

Francis was favorably impressed by this evidence of caution, which was better than reckless confidence.

"Do the job, and I'll give each of you fifty dollars."

"General, them plunkers shall rattle in our trowsers!"

Mr. Honey heartily approved of the plan, as his manner indicated, and the bargain was soon formed. Francis was carrying out a plan which had been in his mind ever since he left town. The love he once felt for Milly was turning to bitter hatred, and he was determined to punish her for turning against him.

It was arranged that Honey and Shaw should go to the town at once, and reconnoiter. If the situation was favorable they were to abduct Milly at once; if not, the attempt was to be made the succeeding night. As soon as she was captured a note was to be left at a designated point, in order that Francis might know of it without trace, trouble or delay.

Holbrook went back to Shaggy Jim's home in a more satisfied frame of mind.

"The chances are that the men will score a success, though that infernal North-land Nick may kill them both. It will be no loss to the world if he does. Ah! my treacherous Milly, I will humble you to the dust before I am through with you! It was for your sake I killed Lemuel Holly. He was an honest, simple-minded man, and his blood is on your hands, not mine. If you had not allowed me to loan you money, and raise the evil in my mind, Holly would have been alive now. For your sake I killed him, and now you turn against me! You shall suffer for it; I will be your judge, and hatred shall make me pitiless. I will avenge Lemuel, and do it well!"

In the mean while, Honey and Shaw were already on their way to Vane's house.

"It's a big pile o' money," declared Perk, "an' we will scoop it in."

"You bet!" Cale coincided.

"We kin go whar we ain't-known, an' hev a right smart spree on a hund'ud dollars. We'll put half of it inter whisky, an' that'll file our windpipes fer about ten days."

"Yes, sirree, an' we'll pass fer real nabobs!"

Reveling in such golden pictures of the future the men went on and soon reached the house. Their first reconnoissance revealed Leonis and North-land Nick in the front room, and sight of the grim old hunter sitting like a sentinel on guard, his rifle standing between his knees, gave the vagabonds a severe shock.

Perk took his companion by the sleeve and led him away.

"Let's liquor!" he suggested.

Each had a well-filled bottle, and they emptied the contents down their throats as they sat in the cover of a business building. The process gave them courage, and they decided that the attempt must be made that night.

They kept in cover until the lights of the town went out and they thought every one must be asleep. Returning to Vane's house, they again investigated. The dreaded hunter lay upon the floor with his rifle by his side, and they devoutly hoped he would continue to sleep until day dawned. Holbrook had told them just where Milly's room was located, and they centered their attention upon it.

When the window was raised they could see some one sleeping soundly on the bed, despite the fact that there was no light, and they continued the experiment.

Perk was light and agile, and he crawled in through the window without creating alarm. It was then found that their victim was within their grasp, if they could get her away without alarm.

They stood together by the bed, and finally moved together. They had provided themselves with cords and a gag, and the first step was to insert the latter in her mouth, which was unsuccessfully done.

Milly awoke in terror, but could sound no cry. She struggled, but in vain. Her strength was little more than nothing opposed to theirs, and her hands were bound behind her back. Quickly they carried her to the window; Honey sprang out, and Cale lifted the captive forward to him.

Shaw was about to follow when there was a sudden and, to him, startling interruption. He was half out of the window and had heard no sound behind him, but human hands seized and held him, and a woman's voice sounded an alarm.

Leonis, who occupied the adjoining room, had been aroused by the struggle, and now made a

diversion which was most untimely for the kidnappers.

"Leave go!" hissed Cale, trying to free himself.

"Help! help!" repeated Leonis, holding fast. Cale was terrified, for a vision of the big hunter with the rifle rose before him, but he was equal to the emergency. With a great effort he flung himself out, dragging Leonis with him, and they had two captives, instead of one.

"Take 'em both, an' skip!" he hurriedly directed. He was a man of twice Leonis's weight, and about all bone and muscle. He lifted the girl and, holding one hand over her mouth to prevent further outcry, began the retreat. Perk kept beside him, carrying Milly—a burden by no means heavy.

The arrangement of the houses was favorable for them quickly to lose themselves to the sight of a pursuer; a fact they had before noticed, and the exact line of flight had been arranged in advance.

After going forty feet they were out of sight temporarily, and they did not fail to improve the chance given them. That North-land Nick, doubtless a light sleeper, would fail to be awakened now was not probable, and fear gave the vagabonds speed.

Luck was singularly in their favor, and it did not desert them as they raced along through the town, and no enemy appeared to confront them. Panting and exhausted, they finally passed the last house and were well among the wild foothills. There they paused for breath, and, looking back, saw lights flashing here and there behind them, some in houses, and some zigzagging along out of doors.

"We've got ter keep it up!" Cale declared.

"They can't ketch us hyer," Perk replied.

"We don't want ter give 'em a chance. Come on!"

The flight was resumed, but, owing to the rough, rapidly-ascending ground, progress was slow, and they seemed almost at a stand-still.

They were not destined to escape without fresh fright. They paused again for breath—a step which, perhaps, was all that saved them. As soon as they ceased to make any sound themselves they heard quick, heavy steps behind them as a solitary man came bounding up the ascent.

"The grizzly-bear hunter!" gasped Cale, with judgment the accuracy of which was due to his fears.

"Lay low!" whispered Perk, "an' don't let the gal squeal!"

The wise plan was followed, and, a few seconds later, a tall figure passed them like a human cyclone. Above its shoulder rose a long rifle, and they easily recognized North-land Nick, but the agility of his motions was a revelation then. That one of his age and size could move so lightly seemed almost impossible.

The veteran's pursuit was one merely bap-hazard, for he had not caught sight of the party, and though he passed within twenty feet of them, he was soon receding; but he had given the vagabonds a shock which made them feel weak and nervous.

CHAPTER XXXV.

TRAIL, BULLET AND PITFALL.

"THAR's goin' ter be a ruction hyer, an' ef the 'arth ain't turned inside out it'll be 'cause somethin' breaks!"

The speaker was North-land Nick, and he thumped his big rifle on the ground in the old way. The morning sun was shining, and there was commotion in Jacob's Ladder. Every one knew that Leonis and Milly had been abducted, and all coincided with the opinion that the outrage was due to Francis Holbrook.

People had become pretty well disgusted with both husband and wife, and few regrets were expressed over Milly's disappearance, but Leonis was a favorite with all, and indignation had reached the fever point.

A general search had been planned, and nearly every one was going who was of suitable age. Several men who claimed knowledge of trailing and mountain ways were to lead the rescuers.

North-land Nick had been asked, but he bluntly refused.

"I hunt on my own hook," he explained.

When Gideon Murdock heard of this statement he sought Nick, and it was to him that the words which stand at the head of this chapter were addressed.

"I understand you don't go with the others," Gideon quietly remarked.

"Right! I don't want a pessel o' know-nothin's ter be treadin' on my heels, an' won't hev 'em. I've always been an independent hunter, an' sech I'll keep on bein'."

"Nick, I want to go with you."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Didn't ye hear what I said?"

"Yes, but it is you, not the big party, that is bound to find the abductors and the young women. I want to go with you, for I feel as much interest in Leonis as you do."

"Be you sure she's interested in you?" Nick asked, gruffly.

"I have no reason to suppose so, but this much I do know: There are no other two men ready to do as much, dare as much, fight as much for her as you and I!"

Something in the straightforward declaration impressed the veteran, and, looking into Gideon's eyes, he saw there the same bold, frank expression he had noticed when they first met on the Razor-back Bar trail.

He shook his head slowly.

"I dunno! Leonis tol' me once she was 'way down on you, an' I set out ter hate yer right off, an' did it, too. Sence then she's 'lowed she has a better idee on you, but I can't let my mind whiffle erround like a pooty woman's. I reckon I've got ter keep right on hatin' ye, critter!"

"Why not bury the hatchet until she is rescued?"

"Might do it, I s'pose, ef I tried."

"Try!"

"An' you want ter go 'long?"

"Yes."

"Come on, but ef you prove a weaklin' I'll thrash ye—I will, by Cain!"

"Wait until Leonis is rescued."

Gideon smiled as he made the answer, for he was not a little gratified by Nick's consent. They finished their preparations at once, and, well armed and suitably provisioned, set off on the trail ahead of the larger party.

Nick at once showed his ability. Finding the trail, he followed it with accuracy and speed which surprised Gideon, though the latter, before he became a lawyer, and in the days when he had followed the occupation of a miner with Lemuel Holly, had lost no chance to study the art of border-craft.

The kidnappers' course had been as direct as possible after reaching the hills, though it gave no clew to the ultimate destination; but the time was coming when even Nick was to be at fault.

Honey and Shaw had been no bunglers, and, finally, they had entered the stream where the water flowed over an extensive ledge. There Nick lost the trail, and he searched in vain to recover it. The solid rock left no footprints, nor could he discover where the fugitives had left the water.

No vegetation, and but little earth, existed along there, and for one-fourth of a mile the water worked its course on, and among ledges and boulders.

Noon came, and the trailers sat down to eat their dinner.

"Cooked grub may soon be strange to us," remarked the hunter, "fer I'm goin' ter stay right hyer an' hunt till Cherry Cheek is found, ef it takes to Christmas."

"Good! I'm with you!" Murdock declared.

"Ain't discouraged, eh?"

"Not a bit."

"Ain't the gal been sassy ter you, in the past?"

"Frankly, yes."

"An' you don't blame her?"

"No."

"You're a queer critter, Gid!"

"How so?"

"You don't act a bit as you used ter. Cherry Cheeks said you had a way that riled her an'timostity up hijjus, an' I allow she was about right. Reckon'd at one time you had the Evil Eye, like I've heerd on down in Mexico; but thar seems ter be some decency in yer, after all."

"Nick," Gideon answered, earnestly, "I came to Jacob's Ladder with a fixed purpose which I may be able to explain soon, but not now. To accomplish my object I resolved on a certain line of conduct and started in, but soon discovered an iron barrier in my way. To avoid falling into the trap I had decided to set for another, I had grow morose, gruff, impertinent and disagreeable. As the necessity no longer exists I have relapsed into my normal condition; that's all."

"All, is it? Wal, it's enough! I don't know what in blazes you're talkin' about, but you've acted like a jabberin' ijjit, by Cain!"

Murdock laughed.

"Have you any hope of me?"

Nick paused with a mouthful of food half-way to his mouth, regarded the questioner gravely for several moments, and then, with the closest approach to humor that had been seen in his peculiar nature for many a day, grimly replied: "I reckon thar is some hope Cherry Cheeks may cure yer!"

"Hunter, you shoot better with rifle than with tongue."

"Bet yer a dude's hat ag'in' a new knife my game drops afore the year's up!" Nick retorted.

"I never bet when on the trail. Shall we start again? We can rest while we walk."

Despite his efforts to seem at ease, Murdock was more accurately hit than he wished Nick to know, and the latter commented on the perceptible fact with a grunt peculiarly his own.

They went on, and Nick was soon absorbed in his work. Gideon did not interfere. Two facts were apparent—he did not know how to recover the trail and Nick did, and he wisely allowed the latter to have his own way. The hunter was equal to the emergency, and, when he had considered all known ways of breaking

the trail and tested them without result, he fell back on another theory.

Over the ledge area loose rocks were scattered in various places, and Nick began to move one after another. It was not long before he found "signs." Turning up a large, flat stone a cavity was revealed below, and he pointed downward and exclaimed:

"Men's tracks! Bet yer a gun the critters ain't a hundred rod away!"

Gideon saw the same signs. Below the thin covering of ledge was earth, and in this were footprints which, even Murdock could tell, were only a few hours old.

"We've got 'em hived!" Nick added, with satisfaction.

The speaker had been nearer right than he suspected when he predicted the proximity of the kidnappers—even then the rescuers were under watch. Twenty feet away was a stone which the hunter had not lifted, yet it had moved within the last few minutes.

Unknown to Nick and his ally, hostile eyes were gleaming upon them from the cover of the second stone, and a bushy head thrust out from that rock revealed the face of Perk Honey.

The vagabond saw the danger that menaced himself and companions, and had the courage to meet it. He reached to his belt and secured a revolver, and then pushed the weapon forward and took aim.

Wary as North-land Nick was, it seemed that only the touch of a finger was between him and death.

The touch of the finger came; the report followed; the bullet sped its course, and a peculiar sound marked the moment it struck the hunter's rifle. A chance movement had interposed the friendly companion of his many adventures, and the bullet flattened on the barrel.

Nick's head came up like a flash; his keen eyes flashed a glance around, and then he bounded rapidly across the ledge.

Perk Honey sunk out of sight, too much alarmed at his own rashness to try to close the cavity, and Nick found it yawning before him when he arrived. He at once gave a sample of his headlong courage. Death might lurk there by fall or assassin hands, but he leaped in unhesitatingly.

He struck on an inclined plane and slipped down several feet in haste, and when he recovered his feet he was alone in darkness. Gideon came tumbling after in the same unceremonious fashion, but Nick did not wait to exchange words.

The enemy was somewhere near, and the hunter was eager to get to work. Putting out his rifle he found a natural passage and began to hurry along, but it was a rough road. Not a thing could he see in the darkness, but there was no trouble in making certain kinds of discoveries; he often tripped over loose stones, and it was a wild chase.

Murdock had continued to let Nick have his own way, but, at last, he broke the silence with the inquiry:

"Wouldn't it be well to have a light?"

"Kin you see any candles fer sale?" snapped Nick.

"Possibly, we might find an abandoned torch."

"You kin look; I'm hyer ter fight!"

The hunter was back in his most ungracious mood, and Murdock did not try to urge the point further. Yet, he was not reconciled to the headlong pursuit, for it gave an enemy too much chance by far to get at and attack them.

In the intense darkness the paymaster could not see his leader, and only the narrow passage and sound of Nick's movements enabled him to follow successfully. Suddenly, all sounds ceased, and he felt, rather than saw or knew, that the veteran had gone from near him.

He paused abruptly and listened.

Nothing was to be heard.

"Nick!" Gideon called, cautiously.

There was no reply; no sound of any one moving.

What did it mean?

"Nick!"

The call was repeated, but without result.

Gideon was fully impressed with the idea that something unpleasant had occurred. He was positive that his companion had not outstripped him in the race, and there was no other way of his getting out of hearing without the aid of some unexpected, perhaps tragic, occurrence. Were there assassins in the passage?

The paymaster put out his rifle to feel of the ground under foot, in advance. Scarcely twenty inches away the path ended abruptly, and, reach where he would, he found only vacancy.

It was a chasm of unknown width and depth, and there was no longer any doubt as to where Nick had gone.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

HER PITILESS ENEMY.

THE morning following his interview with Honey and Shaw on the ridge, Francis Holbrook left Shaggy Jim's cave and went out to look at the town once more. Although he had volun-

farly exiled himself from the place it still had a fascination for him, and he liked to look down and indulge in bitter meditation.

This morning there was more to be seen than the usual dull life of the town. Not long had he looked before he saw the eccentric movements of the citizens which told of some ruling impulse out of the ordinary course of their lives, and further survey revealed the cause.

He saw that Vane's house was the center of interest; he saw men collecting, armed as they never had been before in his recollection, and when they started off in a body, led by men who appeared to follow a trail, what he had gradually been led to suspect became a recognized fact.

"Honey and Shaw have done their work; Milly is abducted!" he cried, with fierce joy. "Ha! won't I bend her proud neck to the most abject humility!"

He hastened to the point where his allies were to leave word when the work was done, but no note was there. He waited for some time; then returned to Shaggy Jim's cave, then went again to look for a note.

Interest and excitement became too strong to endure quietly, and he decided not to wait for a letter, but go at once to Honey and his comrade, the location of their retreat having been described carefully.

Returning to Jim he made the hermit as comfortable as possible, and set food, drink and medicine within his reach. Then, leaving the place, he set off for the larger cave.

"Ha!" he muttered, as he hurried along, "if I find Milly there she shall see what she has done by ruining me. Only for her devilish temper and treachery we might both have lived in peace and luxury all our days. She has ruined me, and if I can't repay the debt I am a bigger dunce than I think I am!"

During the journey Francis had several narrow escapes from running into the searching party, but he managed to avoid discovery and reach the vicinity of the cave. Perk had told him of a cord which was attached to a bell suspended inside, and, after a good deal of search, he found the loose end of the cord and gave it a pull.

Perk answered the call, and Francis was soon in the cave.

"What luck?" he demanded.

"Boss!" the vagabond replied.

"You've got the woman, then?"

"Yes; two of them."

"Two?"

"Jes' so; we're goin' ter start a colony," chuckled Perk.

"What do you mean?"

"T'other female tackled us, an' we sorter scooped her in. We had ter take both, or leave both."

"Who is she?"

"Leonis Vanity, or w'atsomdover her name is."

"Leonis, here!"

Holbrook's first emotion was one of anger, for, if a second woman had been kidnapped, it would render pursuit all the sharper; but this idea was soon succeeded by another. He was eager to be revenged upon Leonis, and fate was singularly kind in throwing her into his hands. He determined to make her suffer to the fullest extent.

"Where are they?" he added.

"In a den we've fixed up fer them. I was goin' ter git word ter you ter-night, but wa'n't reckless enough ter run the gantlet ter-day, and let 'em git at us thereby."

"Your way was right, Honey; perfectly right. Take me to my wife, at once."

"Wait a bit. Two o' the enemy got in at the east entrance, but we reckon they are dead ducks, for they fell down a chasm which we allow is bottomless. They was North-land Nick an' some other feller."

"It's all right if they are dead, but that Nick, alive, is a most dangerous fellow."

"We reckoned so, boss, but he's gone up."

"We'll speak of this later. Now, lead on."

"Wait a bit longer. I never tol' you but Cale an' me has one other chum hyer—Percy Sinclair."

"The gambler? The biggest knave unbung. How do you happen to be in cahoots with him?"

"Things got hot fer the whole on us at the Ladder, an' while we was layin' off, like ships o' war, we fell in with one another, an' agreed to use the cave jintly until we could form plans for the future; so Perce is one on us, d'ye see?"

"It don't please me. That dog would sell us all out for money enough to sit down at a game of poker, and you are in bad company with him around."

Perk straightened up and complacently crossed his shaggy beard.

"I know he ain't quite so high-toned as me, an' you, an' Caleb, but we has ter be kind ter the 'umble and lonely."

Francis was irritated to find that Sinclair was a member of the party, but was too anxious to see Milly to dwell upon the fact then. If the gambler did not ruin them all, his presence was not necessarily objectionable.

Once more Holbrook asked to be conducted to his wife, and he was soon in her presence.

Neither she nor Leonis had been injured dur-

ing the wild night-flight, nor had they been subjected to unkindness at the cave, further than to be kept in confinement. An alcove of the cave, which was large and erratic of shape, had been fitted up for their occupancy, and a wall and a door fitted in roughly at the connecting point. By Francis's orders Leonis was taken out temporarily, and Milly was alone when he entered the prison-place.

She had been alarmed by Leonis's unexplained removal, but fear gave place to petulant anger when she saw Francis.

"So we owe all this to you!" she broke forth.

"You do," he tersely answered.

"I thought so."

"Because you knew you deserved it?"

"Because I knew what a wretch you were."

"I was good enough for you to marry."

"I did not know you, then."

"Nor did you care, as long as you were supported in idleness."

"That's true; I never cared for you any more than I did for my pet dog, and you are not half so worthy."

"Perhaps I am more dangerous!" Francis answered, darkly.

"Oh! I know how villainous you can be!" Milly retorted, bitterly.

"Wrong! You have yet to learn what I can do to those I hate!"

An expression appeared on his face as he spoke these words which startled the woman. Her color changed, and she repented having spoken so recklessly. Life in the cave was different from being in Jacob's Ladder, with friends and the law at her command. She regarded Francis in silence and sudden dismay.

"Woman," he went on, "you have acted the part of a blind fool. You had a devoted husband, a good home and plenty of money. To gratify your abominable temper you threw them all away. What have you now?"

"You brought that woman to the house, and forced me to keep her company," Milly complained, faintly.

"Simply because she swore to make me allow her there, or tell her story in public. That would have shown the world that she, not you, was my wife."

"You married me when you had one wife living already, and now—"

"I met and married Vencila when we were both young. I was only twenty, and I married like what I was, a boy. She proved to be a fiend. She had a fierce temper, would do nothing right, and alienated her own blood-relatives before I, despairing and disheartened, deserted her. Later, I heard she was dead, and the news seemed perfectly reliable. I believed it, and never doubted that I was free. I married you in good faith, and was thunderstruck when she came to Jacob's Ladder. Then my whole purpose became to shield you. I allowed her to enter the house in order to avoid immediate trouble and exposure, and began to scheme to get rid of her."

"Yet, you tried to kill me in the burning house."

"It is false!" Francis retorted, fiercely. "I have told you a part of the truth about that affair. I was doing my best to take you out safely, when I stumbled and fell. You escaped my grasp. Half-stunned, and maddened with fear that harm would come to you, I groped in the blinding smoke for you, but found Vencila, instead, and carried her out, thinking it was you."

Milly was silent, but a painful feeling came over her that she had made a mistake.

Every one at Jacob's Ladder had heard the story of the Hights, in which Matthias claimed that he had awakened to find the house on fire, and then broken down his door and Vencila's. She seemed to be stupefied, and they had become separated while trying to escape.

"I confess that I set the fire," continued Francis, "but I did it to kill, not you, but the Hights. I managed to drug both of them, and thought they would sleep through it all and perish there, but I must have given too small a dose."

Milly could not answer; the impression that she had made a fatal mistake was momentarily growing stronger.

"In brief," Holbrook added, "while I was doing my best to shield you, and doing murder for you, you have deliberately ruined us both. Yes, ruined us; for I shall never go back to Jacob's Ladder—nor will you. I am desperate; I care not what I sacrifice. As for you"—his voice grew louder and more pitiless—"your day is past and mine has come; I will break your spirit, your temper and your heart!"

Milly experienced a sensation as if her blood was turning to ice.

"Perhaps I have made a mistake—"

He laughed sardonically.

"You have; you can wager your life on that."

"I see it now, and retract all I have said; I have wronged you, and am truly sorry. Forgive me, take me back, and we will defy Vencila, go away and begin life anew."

Again came the unpleasant laugh.

"Too late! You have broken the cup of mercy, and at this hour your many transgres-

sions stand in line to harden me and condemn you. You are condemned! Woman, you have ruined me, and you must pay the forfeit. There is no poison like love turned to hate. That poison is at work now, and you shall die!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

IN DEADLY DANGER.

MILLY gazed at the speaker with dilated eyes. Terror had fully seized upon her, and life seemed almost to suspend its operations.

"Mercy!" she gasped.

"Mercy!" Francis echoed, bitterly. "And for such as you? I tell you, the cup of mercy is broken; you must pay the fiddler now you have danced. You shall die!"

The miserable woman would have thrown herself at his feet, but he repulsed her roughly.

"Keep your place!" he ordered. "One like you should never profane prayer by going down upon your knees."

"But, Francis, I have made a mistake, and now—"

"Now, your conscience is quickened by personal fear. The time for you to repent was before you left the town. It is too late, now."

"Francis, if you will forgive me—"

"I will not, and that's the end of it!"

He half raised his hand over the trembling woman, and then lowered it again.

"I'll attend to your case later."

"You ought not to blame me!" cried Milly, with a sudden idea. "I should never have turned against you had it not been for the influence of others."

"What others?"

She tried to think upon whom she could shoulder the lie, but only one name occurred to her as being calculated to help deceive Francis, and make the statement plausible.

"Leonis!" she answered.

It was the vilest of falsehoods, for Leonis had always advised a harmonious course, and, recently, as will be remembered, had surmised the meaning of much of Holbrook's conduct; but Milly accused her best friend without compunction, and, as the statement was in line with the hearer's unjust suspicions, his face grew darker.

"I thought as much!" he exclaimed.

"And will you spare me?"

"You! No; I will sacrifice you both!"

"But I was not to blame; I was led on against my will. You know how I always listened to her."

"Weak fool! you are as ready as usual to place the blame upon somebody else! Her sins shall not excuse yours, but you shall both suffer. Just what I shall do with you I don't know; several plans are in my mind, and one shall be carried out. I'll have you think it over, and to the knowledge that your punishment, be it death or life, is not far away. That's all!"

He went out, and she did not seek to stop him. Every moment he was near she was dreading an outbreak, and his departure was a relief.

Yet she was not at ease. To save herself she had falsely accused Leonis, and the only result was that she had been told both should suffer. Leonis was soon returned to the prison-room by Perk Honey. She was far calmer than Milly, for her naturally even and heroic nature refused to yield to the force of circumstances while one hope remained.

She inquired concerning the interview, and was treated to a shower of tears, incoherent explanations and pitiable lamentations.

Leonis weighed the imperfect evidence given her, and failed to say enough to satisfy Milly, whereupon the latter cried:

"Can't I have a word of your sympathy?"

"Of course you can have that; I was thinking what he was likely to do."

"He will kill me."

"Don't despair."

"Despair! I guess you would, if in my place."

"At least, it is well to keep up courage while hope remains."

"You will not get off so easily, either. Francis declares you have influenced me against you, and—"

"Why does he think that?" Leonis asked quietly.

"I don't know."

"I do! He spoke to me outside, and stated that you had told him what you now say he told you—that I had turned you against him. I know of your falsehood!"

"I never told him so!" asserted Milly.

Leonis was silent.

"I defended you," persisted the woman, "and said you had always spoken well of, and taken his part. So you did—perhaps you loved him, if I didn't."

Leonis disdained to make any reply, for, of late, Milly had revealed her nature step by step until the former knew how she had erred in giving sympathy and friendship to Holbrook's wife. Milly fell into meditation, and finally brightened up and added:

"There is just one hope left. Did you notice how Percy Sinclair looked at us? I always thought he had a fancy for me, and there was admiration in his gaze when he stood by and saw Honey and Shaw put us in this room. I believe he thought of interfering, and he may yet do it. He has the face and form of a gentleman,

and may yet help me out. If there is hope left, it is because there is a gentleman present."

"Milly, do you know Sinclair's reputation?"

"People are often slandered."

"At least, he is a gambler by profession."

"He may not cheat when playing."

"Do you remember how, when you met him at the door of your house, after his call upon Vencila, you refused to return his bow?"

"Don't bring up ancient history!" Milly exclaimed, irritably.

Leonis accepted the command without comment, and both relapsed into silence and the company of the hopes and fears suggested by their own minds.

While they were thus occupied the four men were in the main part of the cave, and getting along together very amicably. There had been a time when Francis Holbrook would have thought himself disgraced had he been seen talking with either Honey, Shaw or Sinclair, but he had gone over the downward road at a fast pace, and the quartette smoked, drank and talked together in perfect harmony.

Sinclair was as anxious to be on good terms with Francis as Perk and Cale were, for the gambler had a scheme to which he wished Holbrook to agree in due time, and this necessitated a reversal of the death-sentence passed upon Milly.

The day wore on and, finally, gave place to another night. No signs of the enemy were seen. Without any proof to that effect Perk and his partner were confident that North-land Nick and Murdock had fallen into a chasm and been killed, while the larger rescue-party did not make its appearance at all.

Shortly before ten o'clock the occupants of the cave prepared for sleep. Honey and Shaw were so confident no one could reach them that even Francis acquiesced in the plan of omitting a guard. The western entrance, through which he had come in, was certainly safe, and a chasm too wide to be leaped seemed to cut off approach on the other side.

All lay down, and were soon asleep.

This step would not have been taken had they suspected that, even then, they were under watch. North-land Nick and Gideon had not perished in the abyss, and the "abyss" was not deep enough, in all places, to deserve the term. Perk and his friend had once thrown stones down to test it, while standing on the movable foot-bridge they had made, and, as these chanced to pass down one of the deep holes which pierced the general bed of the gap, they had gained an exaggerated opinion of its depth.

Nick had fallen, but only far enough to shake him up severely for awhile. Recovering, he held a consultation with Gideon, the result of which was, the foot-bridge being gone, they decided to go down one side of the gap and up the other.

This was the work of hours, requiring labor, ingenuity and patience, but was accomplished at last, and they were finally fairly in the cave.

This was about seven o'clock.

Nick was in favor of immediate attack, but he yielded to Murdock's advice, and they waited until the kidnappers were asleep.

When the attack came it was wholly unexpected, but the plan to make it a struggle more even as to numbers was foiled by the quickness of Perk's hearing. He sprung up just as Nick and Gideon were about to ensnare him in the coils of a rope, and then uttered a cry of alarm which was enough to arouse his allies.

"Wade in!" roared Nick, in a voice like a hurricane. "Don't give the p'izon critters no mercy!"

The first sweep of his long rifle felled Perk Honey, and Murdock again made Cale feel the power of his arm, but Sinclair proved to be a perfect tornado, himself. He returned the attack with fury, wounded Nick in the right arm, and, on the whole, fought so like a fiend that both the rescuers were kept busy with him and Cale for a time.

At last they stood idle, panting but victorious.

"A right smart tussle!" the hunter admitted.

"There are but three men here!" Gideon returned. "Where is Holbrook?"

"Gone, by Cain!"

"Can he have sought the prisoners, to injure them?"

Nick seized the rope and had Cale and Sinclair bound in a remarkably short time. Then he set Perk upon his feet with a thump.

"Critter, lead the way ter them females!" was the order, and the tone thereof was deep and ominous. "Play any trick on us an' I'll skulper, by sin! Yas; ev'ry nigger on yer dies ef harm has come ter Cherry Cheeks!"

And the veteran flourished his rifle and looked so savage that Perk's knees smote together from terror.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE FINAL BLOW.

AT Shaggy Jim's cave again!

The hermit, whose strength was increasing steadily under Holbrook's care, was sitting up, and Francis was by his side. The latter had not gone to Milly and Leonis, in order to injure

them, as Gideon and Nick had feared when they descended upon the kidnappers. Despite Francis's undisputed courage, he had been seized with a panic when that night attack had been made, and he had fled to the main exit and left the cave at once.

Without delay he made his way to Shaggy Jim's home, and there he had been during the thirty-six hours which had since elapsed.

He was disappointed by the failure of his plan to have Milly in his power, but, with characteristic pertinacity, he was resolved not to abandon the attempt. When the men of Jacob's Ladder had quieted down somewhat, he would try again.

Suspecting that a rigid search would be made for him, he had not gone out of Jim's quarters, but, blocking up the entrance again, he devoted himself to the hermit. More than ever he looked upon the old man as his one friend, and did not hesitate to tell him so in terms often effusive and exaggerated.

Jim was grateful, but his antipathy to the world was based on years of experience, and he did not yield to sentimentality now. Gratitude was all right, but he cynically thought that, like other men, his nurse would injure him if selfish interests demanded it.

The fact remained, however, that Francis had saved Sunderland's life.

The men lived together without suspecting the secret that dangled between them. Shaggy Jim had never seen fit to relate that he once saw murder done on the shore of Babel Run, while Francis was still known by the assumed name he gave when he first went to the cave. Jim was gradually recovering his powers of vision, but his sight was not yet good enough for him to recognize his companion.

Francis rested in fancied security. He had arranged the cave-entrance with care and skill, and, forgetting there was one man in the town to whom trailing was a part of daily life, he did not expect any trouble.

Trouble was nearest when he least expected it.

He had prepared breakfast, and he and the hermit were eating in the alcove. Holbrook's spirits had gone from one extreme to another, but, just then, he was in a contented frame of mind. He had recalled an incident of his life before he came to Jacob's Ladder, and was relating it with interest, while, as he talked, he steadily conveyed food from the dish in his lap to his mouth.

Suddenly this dish went flying from his grasp before the impetus given by a blow from a rifle-butt, and, looking up in a startling way, he saw the tall form of North-land Nick looming up beside him.

Nor was the hunter alone! Behind him were Gideon Murdock, Sheriff Day and other men of the town.

Francis realized his danger, and made an effort to reach his weapons, but one there who had lost him before did not intend to lose him again. Nick's huge hands closed upon the fugitive, and he might as well have struggled against an old-time giant.

Before Holbrook could hardly realize the situation, Day had snapped handcuffs upon his wrists. Then he regarded them with eyes full of furious passion.

"What means this outrage?" he cried, angrily.

"Means you're a prisoner," Day explained.

"Release me, or I will have the law of all of you."

"Oh! come, now, take it easy; there are charges enough to have you arrested a dozen times over, and you may as well keep still. Mind, I don't condemn you, and I ain't your accuser; you can meet them, who are, in court, and I'll be as ready as the next one to congratulate you, if you prove yourself innocent. I have my duty to do, now, and you don't want to be rash and talk against yourself."

Francis saw the wisdom of these words.

"How did you find me?" he asked.

"North-land Nick trailed you from the other cave to this."

"Curse him!"

"Thank yer, critter!" coolly commented the hunter. "Ef you hadn't gobbled Leonis, it wouldn't 'a' come ter this, but I'm her guarddeen, an' nobody can't abuse Cherry Cheeks—no, by Cain!"

Francis did not heed these words. His gaze had wandered to Gideon Murdock. Would this man tell the secret of Lemuel Holly's death, now Holly's slayer was so low down? Francis did not forget the proofs given by the paymaster that he knew something about that tragedy, and the matter worried him now.

Gideon did not heed the questioning gaze; he, in turn, was regarding the hermit curiously.

"Whom have we here?" he asked.

"Tis Shaggy Jim, the recluse," Day returned.

"Found!" Gideon exclaimed.

"Found!" echoed Sunderland, sharply. "Do you mean to pounce upon me, as well as on Dow?"

"Who is Dow?"

"Yonder man," and the hermit pointed to Francis.

"Wrong!" Gideon declared, resolved to try

an experiment. "He is Holbrook, owner of the Bald Eagle Mine."

Sunderland started, swept his hand across his feeble eyes, and answered:

"You jest."

"Ask any one here."

"He is Francis Holbrook," corroborated Sheriff Day.

"The man who murdered Lemuel Holly? But, I see that he is. Strange I did not detect it before, but my vision is very dim. So I have been nursed back to life by a murderer!"

All of the search-party were silent with surprise and incredulity except Murdock, but Francis broke out with furious anger:

"You lie, old man; you lie! Somebody has been pouring your ears full of vile falsehoods; I never laid hands upon Lemuel Holly."

"But I saw you myself!"

Murdock whispered to the sheriff:

"Get Holbrook out of the way until we can hear this man's statement. The prisoner may choke the old man off by means of a sentimental appeal."

Francis was hurried away, and in the exchange of position among the men, Sunderland did not notice that he was gone.

"Tell us what you know about the murder," Gideon quietly requested.

"I was on the ridge that night, sitting by the trail that leads down from the Bald Eagle Mine. Two men came down, and I recognized Holly and Holbrook. The latter stopped his older partner on the edge of the cliff, only a few feet distant from me, and engaged him in conversation. He bade Holly look at the light of his home, and then hurled him over the cliff. The murderer ran away. I descended the rocks, but Holly, though still warm, was dead, so I never told of the crime—I have nothing in common with the world. I did make one effort to tell the story of late. When I was taken sick I thought I ought to reveal the secret, and I wrote it out on paper, inclosed the paper in a bottle, and threw the bottle into Babel Run. Then I closed up the mouth of my cave and came in here to die."

This account was a startling one for all to hear, save he who had learned it from the bottle, days before, but it was so meager that many questions followed. There were skeptics in the party, and they suspected that Shaggy Jim's reason was impaired; but his manner, and devotion to details, when the latter were brought out, proved convincing to all, and the men recalled one exclamation which had been made often when Holly died—"Strange that one so sure-footed should lose his balance and fall to death from a familiar path!"

With the wisdom of after-knowledge, which is a wonderful reviver of the wits, they now wondered they had never suspected the truth before.

Holbrook was brought back to the group.

"This man," said Day, pointing to Jim, "has told all. We now know you killed Lemuel Holly!"

"It is a lie!" cried Francis, "and the scoundrel deserves death for saying it. What! would he ruin the one to whom he owes his life? I found him near death; I nursed him back to life; I attended him as if he were my brother. Is it thus he rewards me?"

Sunderland's face grew sober.

"What have I done?" he demanded in dismay.

"Helped on the cause of justice and retribution!" solemnly answered Murdock.

"Villain!" shouted Francis, "you, too, are in the plot to ruin me!"

"Holbrook" was the paymaster's impressive reply, "the time has come for you to know me as I am. Before you ever met Lemuel Holly, he and I were friends. I went to the Colorado mines when a mere boy, fell in with Holly, was helped by him, became his partner, boy though I was; and learned to know him as one big of heart though simple of mind. Later, I abandoned the mines, returned East and became a lawyer.

"A few months ago I had one client who proved to be Warren Holly, brother of Lemuel. He told me Lemuel was dead, and that the mine in which he owned a half-interest had become very valuable, but not one dollar had ever been passed over for his share.

"Deeply interested at once for Lemuel's sake I came to Jacob's Ladder in person, but instead of Edward Avery, as I am really named, I called myself Gideon Murdock, and set out to learn the facts slowly and secretly.

"I soon decided that Holly had been murdered, but I lacked proof; and, while I waited, I saw the murderer in the grasp of Fate. Retribution and punishment came to him through the force of circumstances, and the final touch is just seen here.

"Unsuspicious that Sunderland was the only person who saw the murder, Holbrook nursed him back to life—saved him to be a witness in court when he is tried for murder!"

"Curses on you all!" shouted Francis.

"I will never testify against him!" shrilly asserted the hermit; "I will not injure the man who saved me!"

"Your work is done, already," Gideon answer-

ed. "Not only have you told the facts to all here, but I have the written account you confided to Babel Run in the bottle. We have evidence enough to convict the guilty man!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE BEGINNING AND THE END UNITE.

IT was two o'clock of the following night. Two men stood by the wall of the jail and one was clasping the other's hand warmly.

"I will never forget this in you, Sunderland!" he declared.

"I could not, would not see you suffer. You saved my life and I should be base, indeed, if I did not feel gratitude. The way of the world is not my way, and I care not if these men do want you for murder; the fact did not make me forget what I owe you. When they brought me to the town I did not think myself able to walk, but, will has triumphed over flesh; I came here, struck the guard senseless, and freed you. I am glad I have repaid the debt I owe you."

"Nobly have you done it!" cried Holbrook.

"Let me ask, however, that you do no more violence."

"I promise. Much as I hate those here, I will not run any risk by trying to attack them. I have five thousand dollars at my office; I will take it, go far away, and begin life over again."

"We part here."

"What will you do?"

"Never mind. Let each of us go his way. Good-by!"

There, under the shadow of the jail, they separated, never to meet again. Holbrook hastened away, exulting over his escape. He went at once to his office, entered, and soon had the money of which he had spoken. Then he prepared to go.

He opened the connecting door between the outer and private rooms, still holding the light he had been using, and an unexpected scene was revealed to him. He stood face to face with Vencila and Matthias Haight!

When he entered it was by the main door, but they had forced a window.

He was the first to recover from surprise, and laughed harshly.

"So!" he cried, "you have turned robbers and come here for plunder?"

"At least," retorted Vencila, rallying, "we need not fear arrest for murder!"

"Are you sure your past life is clear of it?"

"But," she went on, a sudden gleam in her eyes, "I will see that you receive your deserts. You shall not escape! Help! he—!"

The first cry was loud and startling; the last only a muffled, incomplete utterance. Francis had sprung forward and seized her.

"Fiend!" he hissed, "you shall not live to enjoy another triumph over me!"

"Hands off, scoundrel!" exclaimed Matthias.

He drew a revolver, but, Holbrook was ahead of him. Before leaving the jail he had secured weapons, and now struck out with a knife. Matthias fell to the floor.

Vencila was struggling to free herself, but again Holbrook laughed unnaturally. Tightening his grasp upon her, he forced the door.

"Where I go, you go, too!" he declared harshly.

At that moment the woman would have made any sacrifice to secure her freedom. When at Holbrook's house and holding her secret over him as a rod of terror, she had been merciless, and had exulted in the mental trouble she inflicted upon him and Milly. Brave indeed, had she been in that affair, but her courage all vanished when she was in danger; she was now a pitiable coward.

Holding one hand over her mouth Francis dragged her out of the office and along the street. He spoke no more, and his purpose was unknown to her, but imagination conjured up more than he could have said.

On, on in the silent march, until silence grew almost unbearable to her. She could not plead for mercy, or shriek for help; she could only go where he compelled her to move.

The town was left behind, and they began to ascend the range. Up, up they went, far up, but, at last, he paused.

"Do you know where we are?" he demanded.

His hand prevented any word from passing her mouth.

"Here," he continued, in a voice strangely exultant, "Lemuel Holly stood the moment before he plunged to death. Below is the gap of Babel Run; below, the jagged rocks that line it. Here, it is fitting you and I should part forever!"

Deeper dismay seized upon the adventuress.

"All the evil I have ever done was due to you, woman. If you had possessed a spark of honor, faithfulness or decency, I should, after marrying you, have gone through life like other honest men, but you were a fiend. You know, as well as I, that your evil ways led your own blood-relatives to cast you off before my own constancy to you wavered; you know how you made our married life a mockery, and plunged into crime. Your record is dark from beginning to end. You came to Jacob's Ladder to wring my heart to the uttermost, and then, when I was low down, indeed, to demand hush-money. You have been a fiend in human shape,

but it will all end here. To-night, you and your imitator in evil, Milly, shall see the end of earth. Both of you are doomed, and I am your executioner!"

He dragged her to the brink of the chasm.

"Look!" he added, "Look once, and then go to your allotted fate!"

She began to struggle desperately, but in vain.

"After you, then Milly!" he muttered, darkly. "So ends the world!"

He endeavored to throw her over the cliff, but she clung fast to his garments. In the struggle her mouth was freed, but she forgot to cry out. Angry at her resistance he put forth new strength, and she hung half over the gulf, but her weight dragged him close to the brink, and an insecure part of the verge crumbled under his feet.

He sunk; he threw out his arms in a wild attempt to save himself; he failed, and both went below the level of the trail. Then there was only space beneath them; and, locked in Vencila's tenacious hold as if they were what the minister had pronounced them years before, one, and one only, they went rapidly, helplessly down toward the roaring water and the rocks of Babel Run.

The following morning Jim Sunderland was found unconscious outside the jail. He had asked too much of his strength when he set out to liberate Holbrook, and had swooned immediately after parting with the latter. He freely confessed his share in the work, and was put back to bed with but little ceremony or pity.

Matthias Haight was discovered desperately wounded at the office, but able to tell his story, and knowledge of Holbrook's movements might have ended there for several days had not North-land Nick taken the trail. As a result, before ten o'clock, Francis and Vencila were found dead, side by side, in Babel Run canyon, and not ten feet from where Lemuel Holly had died.

One sensation had followed another, until the people of the town were confused and excited almost out of their wits, but Gideon Murdock, as we will continue to call Lawyer Edward Avery, was calm enough to seek Leonis and have a long interview.

He told her of his object in coming to the town, and how, as a friend of the Holbrooks, she was marked as one who must suffer, in order that he might accomplish his just vengeance; how all of his singular conduct in days past rose from his peculiar position; and how, when he had come to know her fully, he had discarded Mephistophilean ways, and, honoring her fully, had tried to deserve her respect.

In return, Leonis spoke with glowing cheeks of her own sharp words to him, declaring that even his strange ways were not sufficient cause to make her treat him so severely.

Each had much to explain and regret, but, oddly enough, neither would admit that the other had done any wrong.

One resentment was not healed. When Gideon and North-land Nick brought Leonis and Milly back to Jacob's Ladder, the latter declared she would have no more to do with Leonis, and Leonis heard the decision with a sigh of relief. The latent forces in Milly's character which had developed of late, made her a companion not to be desired.

Milly, however, gave them a fresh surprise soon after. When Perk Honey, Cale Shaw and Percy Sinclair were brought to trial, the judge decided that there was no ground for holding the gambler, and he was released on condition that he would leave town at once. He went, but not alone. He had a short interview with Milly, and then she donned a new suit of clothes, and, with Sinclair, took the first train South.

She followed his fortunes for two years, but little is known of her life by those at Jacob's Ladder. Once, in Idaho, he was arrested for beating her. A few months later Sinclair lost his life at the hands of a mob, and Milly was legally tried for complicity in the same crime which had caused the mob to deal so severely with him. Escaping conviction by a narrow chance, she proved that she had been his wife, received the thirty dollars in money he had possessed, and was then ordered out of town. This was in Montana, but of her after life nothing is known.

A requisition from the Governor of Colorado for Perk Honey and Cale Shaw having been made, these vagabonds were turned over to that State, and they are now serving sentences in prison, as they well merited.

The bodies of Francis and Vencila were buried at Jacob's Ladder, but in graves wide apart.

Matthias Haight recovered after a long illness, and, escaping trial, as there was no charge to be brought against him, left town forever.

Shaggy Jim was not molested for freeing Holbrook, for no one regretted the end of the affair, and the old man returned to his cave-life.

North-land Nick would remain with his acquaintances but a short time. Declaring that grizzly bears were the only fit companions for a "man of brains," he went back to the remote ranges of the Rocky Mountains. Rough as he was, Leonis had learned that a good heart beat

under his hunting-frock, and he had all of her good will and respect.

The Bald Eagle Mine was sold, and the proceeds equitably divided between Warren Holly, as the heir of Lemuel on the one hand, and the heirs of Francis Holbrook on the other, all of whom were found to be residents of New Jersey.

Gideon Murdock lingered at Jacob's Ladder much longer than seemed necessary, and, after once going away, was back again in three months. This time his stay was brief, but was marked with a notable event—nothing less than his marriage to Leonis. They went to his home in one of the largest cities of the Northwest, and there he is practicing his profession, while Leonis is mistress of his home.

A suitable marble head-stone long since took the place of the rude stone at Lemuel Holly's grave, erected by Gideon, and in this tribute to his memory there was no hypocrisy.

THE END.

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